

The Role of Vocation in Conflictual Religious Education Settings

by Peter Gilmour

(a draft for APRRE meeting, 2002)

The ancient Chinese blessing/curse, “may you live in interesting times” holds particularly true today for religious educators. The two most significant developments of the 20th century – feminism and cybernetics – along with a host of other phenomena, have begun to bring about a heretofore unknown and new world which is often characterized as postmodern. Past dominant categorical ways of thinking about and approaching people, places, and things no longer embody nor are they directed by the once presumed eternal verities. In the place of past certitude (which, of course, from a postmodernist perspective, looks far from certain) comes an array of new ways to think about and approach everything, including religious education.

The postmodernist multiplicity of inquiries and interpretations is particularly challenging to many religious bodies. Multiplicity stands in stark contrast to the monolithic interpretations of realities that religious traditions with strong central authority figures and systems like to put forth. Multiplicity also challenges the image of a homogenous religious identity which various religious denominations try to manifest.

In this paper I explore three diverse contemporary situations which face Roman Catholic religious educators who exercise their vocation in a church environment that puts a high value on orthodoxy and identity. The three situations are: (1) the canonization of Juan Diego; (2) the ongoing sex scandals among the clergy; and (3) interfaith activity are the three specific .

The Canonization of Juan Diego

On July 31, 2002 Pope John Paul II raised Jan Diego to sainthood. The question asked by some about this canonization particularly: was a real person or an imaginative story canonized when the Roman Catholic Church officially raised Juan Diego to sainthood? This is an important question because it challenges a religious tradition that claims history as a great divine manifestation. It is also important because the Roman Catholic Church, as a result of their Second Vatican Council, committed itself to apply stringent historical standards to their list of

canonized saints.

Juan Diego's story dates back to a decade after the conquistador, Hernando Cortez defeated the mighty Aztec Empire of Mexico. In December, 1531 Diego had visions of Mary at Tepeyac, a one time sanctuary of Tonanzin, an Aztec goddess. She told him to go the bishop, Juan Zumarraga, and request a church be built there in her honor. The doubtful bishop requested that Diego produce proof of his vision. During a subsequent vision, Diego gathered flowers that were than arranged on his cloak by Mary who sent back to the bishop. When Diego opened his cloak before Zumarraga, the bishop saw an imprint of the virgin on Diego's cloak. He deemed the vision real and built the church. A subplot in the story has Mary also appearing to Diego's uncle, critically ill with a European disease, healing him, and calling herself, "Our Lady of Guadalupe."

History or story? Some who believe this story is not historical have traced its origins to an era of Mexican Catholicism years later when overly zealous missionaries created the story of Juan Diego as a dramatic evangelization tool in their arsenal for use against the pagan Aztec culture. The cloak that holds the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which has been venerated at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, is said to be the work of a skilled artist, much the same as is said by critics of the Shroud of Turin.

Juan Diego's canonization also calls into question the post Vatican II standards for canonization. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first document approved by the Second Vatican Council, called for a revision of the church's calendar, in part to "work hard to prevent or correct any abuses, excesses or defects that many have crept into" devotion of saints. C. J. McNaspy, S.J., pointed out that the late '60s revision of the church's calendar "stresses those saints whose lives are sharply discernible and proposed as prototypical of goodness, and those who have something to say to the world at large."

Does a religious educator operating within the Roman Catholic Church teach Juan Diego as an historical figure because of the church's official canonization? Or does the does the religious educator incorporate into his/her teaching about this now officially declared saint alternative interpretations as he/she goes about teaching about saints, particularly this saint? D. A. Brading's 2001 book, Mexican Phoenix and Stafford Poole's 1995 book, Our Lady of Guadalupe both suggest story over history. And how might a religious educator reconcile the post Vatican II standards for naming saints with present day practice?

Ongoing Sex Scandals among the Clergy

The hierarchical leadership of my own church, Roman Catholicism, reposes before the world today as, at least, seriously compromised, and, at most, morally bankrupt. From whatever vantage point one views the incredibly upsetting revelations of the past year, all parties agree that Roman Catholicism now faces an epic crisis of credibility and leadership.

My specific focus in this paper is on the *response* of those who hold official positions of leadership within Roman Catholicism to the reality of clergy who are or who have been sexually abusive to their parishioners. By doing so I neither dismiss or minimize the seriousness of these acts by clergy. Such acts are clearly immoral and illegal.

Roman Catholicism faces this crisis of credibility and leadership in part because of its hierarchical leadership. The carefully orchestrated attempts to discredit and/or silence victims by various moral pressure and legal maneuvering worked for a long time, but time has now caught up with a power structure who apparently thought this day would never come.

In such a centralized authority structure as Roman Catholicism, most all resources are carefully controlled by the clerical establishment as are many of the cultural symbols which undergird this authority structure. The bishops, have used an incredible amount of financial resources to compensate victims, and, in doing so, often demanded silence as part of settlements. So no one yet knows the extent of American Catholicism's financial resources has been expended.

A major cultural symbol of Roman Catholicism is, of course, the clergy, both priests and bishops. Prior to Vatican II, clergy were the pinch in the hourglass through which all sand had to fall. Subsequent to Vatican II, Roman Catholicism has developed a more inclusive theology, emphasizing the entire People of God and the universal call to holiness. Nonetheless, the culture of Roman Catholicism in many people's minds still substantially centers on clergy.¹

This crisis is now public domain. Regrettably, it is not because of enlightened bishops who have recognized the sexual addictions and practices of some clergy as abhorrent to humanity and also as a threat to the life of the church. Rather, hierarchical secrecy on this matter has not survived because abused people began to

¹Even though I claim the culture of Roman Catholicism is still very clergy centered, there are vibrant precincts which move in other directions. Certainly base Christian communities, the small group movement, various approaches to and practices of spiritualities, and various activist movements embody a very different culture of Roman Catholicism. Within these precincts lies a particular strength this church. They are participatory models of Roman Catholicism that could well provide models for a more healthy, future organizational structure for this church.

go public, because courts of law have found priests guilty and held them accountable, and because the media have given center stage to many of the complexities involved in this whole matter.

Leadership in this horrific problem plaguing Roman Catholicism has not come from their designated leaders, i.e., priests, bishops, popes. Rather it has emerged from its rank and file members or one time members, from self-help organizations of the abused, from lawyers, civil not canon, from state and federal courts, from the fourth estate, and from the media.²

Roman Catholicism might well be only in the initial stages of confronting this horrific reality within its midst. Time will tell. Nonetheless, many commentators on Roman Catholicism have put forth long range solutions to this crisis, and two broad schools of thought emerge. One school of thought seeks to end the scandal of clergy pedophiles by improving screening processes for potential entrants into the clergy. The other school of thought seeks to reform the authority structure of Roman Catholicism so that both responsibility and accountability rests on a broader foundation than the clerical paradigm.

Only time will tell whether a church whose tradition is so exclusively hierarchical will truly change, or whether it will continue to try to handle this as a manageable problem. What might well tip the scales in favor of real change, in addition to the horror of the given situation of sexual abuse, is the developing consciousness among many Roman Catholics that they need not sit idly by while others, i.e., bishops “solve” this problem. More and more Catholics see themselves as vital stakeholders in their church, and therefore want to exercise their influence in this matter. They might not yet call themselves “leaders” within the church, but they have an incredible opportunity to exercise leadership in their church.

The elephant in the room of contemporary Roman Catholicism has now been named publically and prominently. Catholic religious educators must now operate within this horrific context. How do Catholic religious educators today present the official structures of Catholicism with credibility? How do Catholic religious educators foster a commitment to influential and participatory leadership among their students?

²First, I am aware that some of the collaborators in leadership I have cited, lawyers, journalists, and the media are often held in low esteem by people today. Their motivations are not considered pure since great sums of money are involved in their practice. Likewise, some victims have and might well continue to receive a great deal of money in settlement. Nonetheless, these are the people who have been the major movers in correcting a tolerated intolerable situation. Elie Wiesel has said that silence always favors the oppressors and never the oppressed.

Inter-Faith Activity

In the late 1950s J. B. Phillips published the book, Your God Is Too Small. In the introductory, he wrote about contemporary Christians, “While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static.” (v) Phillips then goes on from there to enumerate several unreal conceptions of the divine, among them God as resident policemen, God-in-a-box, and God the pale Galilean to name but a few. In the second part of Your God Is Too Small, Phillips wrote about “an adequate God.” “We can never have too big a conception of God, and the more scientific knowledge (in whatever field) advances, the greater becomes our idea of His vast and complicated wisdom.” (pp. 135-136).

Today, more than a half century later, J. B. Phillips’ book stands both as a ground breaking book and as an intriguing piece of Christian parochialism. Your God is Too Small did a great deal to expand people’s thinking about God, especially Christians who were Phillip’s intended audience. His portrayal of the God-in-a-box” mentality was particularly striking: “the narrowing of the Gospel for all mankind into a set of approved beliefs...(and) the exclusive claim made by each one to be the ‘right one.’”(pp. 38-39). He called this phenomenon that he believed pervaded all denominations, “churchiness.” (P. 37)

In retrospect, however, today’s reader is also struck with the datedness of this marvelous work. For example, his consistent rhetoric of sexist language stands as an obstacle for some readers today. Even more striking, from the vantage point of the early part of the 21st century, is Phillip’s exclusive horizon of Christianity. Although he uses “the man who is outside all organized Christianity” (p. 37) as one vantage point to examine Christian denominations, he does not extend his vision of a larger God to other non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions. It is like they simply do not exist in his consciousness. This lacuna is especially serious today when religious and spiritual traditions other than Christian have become so prominent, both in the personal lives of many Christian and in the social lives of societies that traditionally have defined themselves as Christian.

Just as Phillips challenged Christians to expand their conceptions of God a half century ago, today there are many challenges for all people of all faiths to expand their knowledge and attitudes about non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions. The vast migrations of peoples who bring their particular spiritual and religious traditions to new lands, the recovery of older spiritual and religious

traditions coupled with the emergence of new spiritual traditions, often lumped under the title, “New Age”, the information explosion due to the Internet, and the various political hot spots around the world are but a few of the realities that bring all sorts of religions and spiritualities into contemporary consciousness.

Diana Eck, in her book, A New Religious America, documents this reality. The United States, once an overwhelmingly Christian country, today is well on its way to becoming the most religiously diverse country in the world. Regretfully, few people have absorbed this phenomenon and its implications. Some of those who have wish to restore the United States to its Euro-Christian roots by favoring immigration laws which would restrict people from other parts of the world settling in this country. Many others are far more open minded, yet they, for the most part, have neither the informational background nor the theological orientation to fully embrace this phenomenon. As a culture, rank and file Americans are just beginning to learn a few things about non Christian religions and spiritualities. One of the problems is that the official religious and spiritual leaders have received scant training in interfaith realities.

How should religious educators today from specific religious traditions expand the horizons of their students beyond the specifics of their denomination? When they do so, how do they then convince others, particularly those people in the authority structure of their religious body, that they are doing something worthwhile?

Conclusion

These three desperate situations, the canonization of Juan Diego, the ongoing sex scandal among the clergy, and interfaith activity, individually and collectively challenge both the church and religious educators. How do religious educators educate with integrity given these and other situations? Using “approved” texts, denying that conflict exists in these and other situations, and employing other short term managerial strategies do not get to the heart of the matter. Nor will the ecclesial organizational charts with their specific lines of reporting and accountability ultimately lead to decisions of integrity for religious educators.

Rather, an awareness and understanding of vocation will best and ultimately guide the religious educator through these and other conflictual situations and settings. Vocation, an authentic call from the Divine to speak and to act, must be the religious educator’s mainstay. A strong sense of vocation transcends the image of a religious educator from a cog in a well-oiled machine to a postmodernist agent

of the Divine. It is the vocation of the religious educator that transforms his/her work from the mechanistic level of a church sponsored technician to the visionary practice of communicating the Divine Presence. I believe it is from this identity that religious educators will best be guided in these aforementioned, and yet other, conflictual situations and settings in this postmodernist age.