

The Traditional Italian Festa: A Theology of Communion and Catechesis

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Abstract

This paper examines expressions of popular religion and their potential as means of Christian religious education. In particular, it studies the traditional Italian *Festa* and the manner in which Catholic communities, particularly parishes, may use this tradition as a means of fashioning a people and as a context in which to educate toward community and communion. The paper argues that the *Festa* tradition can be a fruitful expression of the educational vision of various contemporary educators. In order to assist in demonstrating this potential, the article reports ethnographic research conducted at one specific manifestation of the *Festa* tradition, the 118th annual Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Paulinus of Nola in Brooklyn, New York, celebrated in July 2005. The experiences and observations of the researcher during participant observation in this Feast are evaluated in light of the work of contemporary religious educators.

Visitors from outside the festa of Our Lady of Mount Carmel over the years have not always recognized what they saw and see there . . . as religious. What was taking place at the festa [was] the integration of young people into the traditional values, the communal reaffirmation of these values, the establishment of the nexus between individual and family, family and community and so on . . .

Robert Orsi

The Italian Festa Tradition

The celebration of the traditional Feast, called *Festa*, has been a part of Italian culture for centuries. Defined succinctly, the *Festa* encompasses the secular and religious rituals that surround the commemoration of a particular saint or holy day. Throughout Italy, but particularly in the south, communities honor saints on their feast days and celebrate Church holydays through *Festas* which typically include liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations, festive communal meals, games of chance and skill, elaborate processions through the local streets and some level of Marian devotion. Much of the merriment of these Feasts occurs not in the Church building, but in the local streets surrounding it. These festivities last several days and are prepared by the community over the course of several months. For many Italians and Italian-Americans, the *Festa* is more than simply an isolated event within the year. “Its meaning goes much beyond a limited understanding of a party as a single moment in time; Festa is a means of viewing the world and social relationships. It is a way of life” (Gibino 1990, 5). Today, more than 300 major Italian Feasts are celebrated in 23 states and the District of Columbia (Gesualdi 2004, 47).

The *Festa* tradition serves as a quintessential example of popular religious devotions. While often disparaged in the past as corruptions of legitimate religion (Orsi 2002, 15), the popular religious practices of various ethnic groups are currently being revisited by scholars and reevaluated. In many cases, they are being afforded long overdue respect. Michael Carroll notes, “ . . . studies suggest that popular religion arises mainly from creative processes originating from within the people themselves, rather than from the distortion of an official religion” (1992, 7). Furthermore, Elizabeth Johnson asserts,

There is . . . a growing scholarly interest in popular religion, long neglected because of rationalistic bias. By no means restricted to unsophisticated lay people, popular cultic expressions are signs of a worldview and set of relationships shared by bishops, clergy and lay people alike which strengthen confidence and help communities to create meaningful lives in stressful circumstances (1998, 11).

This paper approaches popular religious practices in this positive sense. Herein I aim to demonstrate how such practices can in fact be fruitful means of Christian religious education. In seeking to demonstrate the educative value of the *Festa*, I will report ethnographic research conducted during the 118th annual Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Paulinus of Nola, in Brooklyn, New York.

The Festa Tradition and Christian Religious Education

Robert Orsi begins his work, *The Madonna of 115th Street, Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, what may be considered the classic tome on the *Festa* tradition, by saying that it is about the religion of the streets. The same can be said of this particular paper. More specifically, this paper seeks to examine the manner in which this religion of the streets, the traditional Italian *Festa*, has been and continues to be used by Italian-American families and parishes as a communal means of incorporating persons, particularly the young, into the family of the Church. In short, it studies the manner in which the *Festa* fashions and sustains a people.

Orsi's use of street imagery is appropriate because this paper will examine how the *Festa* educates, not in the closed, indoor setting of a conventional classroom, but in the "outdoor" setting of life and experience. Many contemporary religious educators have challenged members of the Church community to broaden their vision of education as something that goes beyond schooling (Harris 1989, 39). I hope to demonstrate that the *Festa* tradition is a means of religious education that does just that, functioning with the understanding that, "the end of religious education is the embodiment of a religious way of life in community" (Edie 2005, 267).

The Giglio Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Paulinus of Nola

The particular manifestation of the *Festa* tradition examined in this article is called a *Giglio* (pronounced JEEL- yo) Feast, a term which will be explained shortly. Each July in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York, the Shrine Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, founded in 1887, hosts the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Paulinus of Nola. The Feast honors these saints in a well-attended festival lasting eleven to fourteen days.

Both of these patron saints are particularly dear to southern Italians (Primeggia and Varacalli 1996, 424). The Virgin of Mount Carmel is a manifestation of Mary, *La Madonna* in Italian, who, as pious tradition recounts, appeared to the General of the Carmelite Order in 1251 and granted the gift of the Scapular, a sacramental worn around the neck as a sign of devotion to the Virgin and her protection over devotees. Saint Paulinus was the bishop of the city of Nola, located near Naples, Italy. While Paulinus was a respected fifth century prelate who corresponded with Augustine and Jerome, (Walsh 1966, 3) the people of Nola remember him more for his purported heroism when their town was raided. As the story is traditionally recounted, North African conquerors attacked Nola around the year 410 A.D. (Primeggia and

Varacalli 1996, 424). As these conquerors enslaved the Nolani children, Paulinus offered himself in place of a widow's only son. A Sultan, traditionally called the Turk, was impressed with stories of this act of selflessness.

The Turk went to North Africa and bartered for the life of Paulinus and the children, returning them to Nola on his ship. The townspeople were overjoyed at the safe return of their children and the heroic actions of their bishop. In Paulinus' honor, they carried large towers of lilies (*Giglio* means 'lily' in Italian), a flower which is considered a symbol of love and purity (Primeggia and Varacalli 1996, 425).

While the extent to which this story is legendary has been debated, the practice has remained to this day an essential aspect of life in Nola, Italy. Every year on the Sunday closest to June 22, the feast day of Paulinus, eight tremendous *Giglio* structures, as well as the Turk's Boat representing Paulinus' triumphant return, are carried by the men of the city. This elaborate Feast remains, "one of the few spectacular festas still celebrated in Italy, though it has generally been ignored by English-speaking investigators" (Carroll 1992, 42). When the Nolani came to the United States and began this Feast in their enclave of Williamsburg, they carried only one *Giglio* and Boat.

Participant Observation

In order to examine the manner in which youth are educated through the *Festa* tradition, I conducted ethnographic research from January to August of 2005 at this Brooklyn *Giglio* Feast. I was granted access to all aspects of the Feast and its celebration. Beginning in late January, hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers began weekly meetings and festive social gatherings in order to organize the many components of their Feast. For several months, I was warmly welcomed into the lives of these parishioners, all of whom enthusiastically spoke of their beloved *Festa* tradition.

All of these months of preparation are necessary, as this multi-faceted Feast consists of various activities in the Church and throughout the streets of the neighborhood. An assortment of indoor and outdoor religious devotions, a carnival-type setting covering four local blocks and a two-tiered bazaar on parish grounds are all fused into one massive festival. Such a spectacle could not be successful without an extensive network of individuals devoted to the tradition. Each year, even those who are not directly involved in preparations eagerly await this Feast, which is seen by many as the significant cohesive force in Italian Williamsburg (Primeggia and Primeggia 1982, 7).

Liturgy of the Streets: The Dance of the Giglio

Amidst all of the festivities, liturgies and processions stands majestically the *Giglio*, which is the centerpiece of this Brooklyn Feast. Each year, the Dance of the *Giglio* draws thousands of spectators and considerable news coverage. The obelisk-shaped *Giglio* is made of aluminum and stands approximately 85 feet tall, dwarfing many of the local apartment houses. It weighs approximately two tons. At the base of the structure, which supports the tower, 28 poles protrude. These poles are used by Lifters to carry the *Giglio*. The base also serves as a bandstand, on which sits an Italian festival band, a singer and an emcee, all adding significantly to the already considerable burden on the Lifters' shoulders. The tower itself is covered in wood and

papier-mâché, decorated with images of various angels and saints, particularly the Virgin Mary, as well as lilies. Perched atop the mammoth structure sits a life-sized statue of Saint Paulinus, dressed in actual episcopal vestments that are impeccably tailored by a parishioner who donates his sartorial skills. From this height, Paulinus symbolically watches over his people and their festivities.

Each year, the community celebrates the Dance of the *Giglio* on a local holiday known as *Giglio* Sunday. Past and present neighborhood residents, thousands of spectators and often a few politicians gather in the front of the Church to witness the seemingly immovable *Giglio*, as well as the Boat, dance gracefully through the streets. After a festive liturgy called the Mass of Saint Paulinus, over 300 young Lifters and their families make their way out of the Church and toward the statues to begin the dance.

The tremendous weight of the *Giglio* makes it impossible for the “dancing” to be a continuous procession. The dance is broken into about 25 individual “lifts,” each lasting approximately three to five minutes. Each lift is under the direction of a *Capo*, which means head or leader in Italian. During a lift, the structure is raised off the ground at the appropriate point in the “*Giglio Song*” and carried anywhere from five to twenty yards. Dancing the *Giglio*, as the phrase implies, involves more than simply moving the statue from one point to another. Lifts include bouncing, swaying, a cha-cha, partial and complete turns, and occasional moments in which the structure is held upright but not moved in any direction. These displays usually cause the massive tower to sway, a sight that can be both impressive and disconcerting to awed spectators. All of this depends on the manner in which the *Capo* chooses to dance the structure. This festive dance continues for about four hours, as the *Giglio* and Boat make their way through the Feast amidst the cheers of thousands of spectators enjoying Italian delicacies from the stands lining the streets.

Youth and the Feast

The Feast generally defines youth as those ranging in age from 7 to 18. This definition is based on opportunities and tasks made available to participants, with formal participation typically beginning at 7 and adult tasks usually assigned around the age of 18. Much of the work of the Feast is intergenerational, with committees and other responsibilities divided between persons ranging from teenagers to senior citizens.

Youth are exposed to the Feast from their infancy, as I witnessed hundreds of youngsters each night in strollers or walking at their mother’s side. In most cases, parents brought these young children, usually resplendent in Feast t-shirts and other *Festa* apparel, to the Shrine in order to light candles to the *Madonna*, to stop in the Church for participation in the nightly Novena and Eucharistic benediction, or to simply offer a prayer before the parish’s statue of Our Lady. Other children walked in the processions with their parents, toy trumpets in hand, wondering aloud why they were not yet permitted to assist their fathers and older siblings in the many responsibilities of Feast activity. One of the mothers was beaming as her two year old son, Matthew Gallo, demonstrated for me his ability to make the sign of the Cross and pray briefly before Our Lady’s statue. “He loves coming to Mass on Sundays.” She told me. “He associates it with the Feast.”

Particularly impressive was the celebration of the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on July 16. On this local holyday, hundreds of parents brought their young children to walk

under the hot sun, processing and prayerfully singing along with families of Haitian, Polish and Hispanic descent, all of whom share a common devotion to the Virgin of Mount Carmel. The procession covered a significant portion of Williamsburg and lasted over three hours. One young couple, processing with their two toddlers, succinctly summed up the attitude expressed by various informants when they noted, “This is how we were raised and we are trying to give our children the same upbringing in the Faith. We are Catholic. We are Italian. This is what we do.”

After this initial socialization, the young become actively involved in the tradition at about the age of seven. At this age, the young person begins lifting the Children’s *Giglio*. A scaled down version of the actual *Giglio*, this structure stands approximately twenty feet in height. On two nights during the Feast, young boys and girls from the parish recreate the Dance of the *Giglio*, carrying the structure in imitation of their fathers and older brothers. The purpose of the activity is quite clear; the young are being handed the tradition of the *Festa* and made to understand its many components.

Once in their teenage years, the young men and women of the parish become involved in different ways. The young men become “Lifters” of the actual *Giglio* and Boat, hoping to rise up the ranks of the Feast hierarchy and eventually obtain the highly coveted title of *Capo*, which is a distinct local honor. Many young informants, in fact, spoke of their desire to remain active in the community and one day attain the rank of *Capo*. The *Capo* carries a cane as a symbol of his authority as he guides each individual lift of the *Giglio*. Decisions for promotion are made by the Advisory Board of the Feast, a group of senior Feast dignitaries headed by the pastor. Such decisions are typically based on the young man’s persistent commitment to the parish community. In this particular Feast, it takes a minimum of twenty years after becoming a Lifter to ascend to the rank of *Capo*, meaning that those men who aspire to this post must give a lifetime of active service to the Feast, parish and local community.

Young women of the community do not become Lifters, but become involved in the tradition in various other ways. Currently, women serve on a variety of committees involved in both the planning and the celebration of the Feast. Women participate in liturgies, work in different stands and assist in running the bazaar and the outdoor Shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. While the roles of males and females have traditionally been distinct and complementary in the Feast, women have an emerging voice in this particular celebration and are by no means excluded.

As mentioned, in order to achieve the coveted rank of *Capo* within the Feast community, young persons are expected to volunteer for various parish and community activities, which they do in impressive numbers. In informal interviews, both the former pastor and the present pastor sang the praises of the Feast as a unique means of getting youth involved in the Church. Monsignor David Cassato, pastor of the parish from 1985 to 2001, calls the Feast the very heart of the community and noted, “The Feast brings people into the Church and keeps them involved. The people love it. It is a tremendous instrument of evangelization and catechesis for this parish.” In a different interview, Cassato asserted, “Where can you get a captive audience of 300 young men in their 20s and 30s . . . for outreach and evangelization for those who may be slipping away from the faith?” (Primeggia and Varacalli 1996, 433). The current pastor, Reverend Fonti, heartily concurred, adding that, “The Feast is a tremendous vehicle for building community.”

The Feast Family: An Extension of the Domus

Many of the participants with whom I spoke referred to the Feast as an extension of the family. Orsi notes that Italians historically function within a worldview that he terms domus-centered (2002, 72). The *domus*, according to Orsi, includes primarily the family, but also transcends blood ties to encompass the neighborhood and even the *Festa* community. Those who are considered part of the *domus*, despite a lack of consanguinity, are called *comari* and *compari* (Orsi 2002, 90). Persons deemed worthy of this membership in the *domus* are to be treated with unconditional love, loyalty and respect. Among contemporary Italian-Americans, the *domus* mentality has been somewhat tempered by the postmodern experience and the contemporary propensity toward individualism (Primeggia and Varacalli 1996, 439). The mentality, however, has endured for the most part and still characterizes a significant aspect of the contemporary Italian-American milieu.

Throughout the months of research, this *domus* mentality was evident in various aspects of Feast celebration. A sense of camaraderie prevailed and informants consistently spoke of each other as members of their “Feast family.” Most informants often expressed some form of the sentiment of one man who told me, while choking back tears, “The Feast is my family. I grew up in the Feast. I would never leave.” During the eleven nights of the Feast, some local homes were opened to all participants, who ate and drank together in communal settings each night before the streets opened for Feast business. One home in particular, that of beloved Feast icon Jimmy Smith, is annually transformed into the community house, where parishioners and neighborhood personalities assemble and share both meals and memories. Located right in the center of street activity, the Smith family hosts literally hundreds of past and present parishioners throughout the days and nights of the *Festa*.

Views on the Feast

During the course of the Feast and its preparations, I was afforded the opportunity to speak to various young men and women who expressed strong sentiments for the tradition. From January to August, I informally interviewed various young men and women in order to ascertain their connection to the Feast, the influence it has had upon their lives and the manner in which the *Festa* experience has incorporated them into the Church community. Since a detailed account of these informal interviews would not be possible here, an overview will suffice. The sampling of informants chosen reflects the general consensus of the Feast population that was studied. Additionally, they represent both the young who are currently being socialized into the Christian community as well as adults who, having been part of the Feast community since their youth, remain active members.

The interviews revealed several different but interconnected sources of attachment to the Feast community and to the Catholic Faith as a whole. Most persons, from pre-adolescents to adults, expressed similar sentiments in regard to the Feast. The informants listed Faith, family, community and ethnicity as their reasons for actively participating in the Feast, with informants prioritizing differently among these four. Few informants failed to list their Faith as having at least some influence upon their involvement in the tradition. This reveals that the majority of persons involved view the *Festa* tradition as an expression of their Catholic Faith, as opposed to

a solely cultural activity. Some informants, however, emphasized bonds of family and community far above issues of Faith and beliefs. Nearly all informants agreed that whatever connection they have to the Catholic Faith has been sparked in large part by their lifelong participation in the *Festa* tradition as lived out in this Brooklyn community.

Among those who offered their thoughts on this Feast, Anthony, 16, was among the most enthusiastic. Anthony is an aspiring *Giglio* singer, whose personality and talent have already gained him the honor of singing several times on the *Giglio* structure. Anthony credited his interest in traditional music, as well as his involvement in the Church community, to the Feast. The articulate young crooner spoke of the *Festa* tradition, particularly his “Feast friends”, as central in his life, noting, “It’s in my blood. You do it for the Church, for the tradition, for the culture. My family is proud. You need *Capos* and lifters and of course, you need singers. We have to keep this community going.”

John, 18, grew up in Williamsburg but moved to Florida, New York with his family some years back. Each year from January to July, John endures the long trek into Brooklyn in order to assist in preparations for the Feast. He serves on the *Giglio* committee, responsible for decorating, repairing and assembling the structure each year. When I inquired as to his involvement in the Catholic community in Upstate New York, he responded, “I have attended Mass on Sundays in the Church near my Upstate house. It’s nice but not the same. This is my family. This is my community. I don’t feel the same connection up there. You just go to Mass and that’s it. Here we have the Feast family.”

Several adult informants reported that their current involvement in the community is a direct result of being socialized into the life of the Church through their experience of the Feast. Daniel, 23, explicitly referred to the Feast as educative, specifically noting that his Faith was nurtured by his participation in the tradition. He spoke of a strong Marian spirituality, which he imbibed during his youth at the foot of the statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, where his mother would take him for prayer each night of the Feast. He noted, “The Feast has a strong influence in my life and on my Faith. From the time I was young I was brought here to the Shrine to pray to Mary. Today, she helps me though my life and my involvement in the Feast is because of her.” Besides his Feast duties, Daniel serves as one of the sacristans, a Eucharistic minister and coordinator of the parish Altar Servers. He is also among those in the parish who distribute meals to the less fortunate of the community.

Anna, 24, admitted that prior to joining the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, she and her family had little involvement in the Church community besides attendance at Mass. She noted, “We were drawn to this Church because of the sense of community that was definitely absent in our first parish. We saw the Feast and the way this place is so close-knit and we just could not leave.” Today, Anna and her sister Kathy, immigrants from Poland, are respected young leaders in the parish, serving on two different Feast committees and volunteering throughout the year in parish activities.

Dan, 35, told me that he has been involved in the Feast since he was 15. He said that during his youth, prior to his involvement in this Feast community, “religion to me was simply books I had to study so I could receive the sacraments.” Dan made it very clear that the Feast has had a tremendous influence on his involvement with the Church in general and in the development of his religious Faith. He informed me, “The Feast is a time of great personal joy, a time when the entire community comes together. The Feast has great influence in my religious life. It has given me a deeper desire to be an active member of my parish, with no earthly gain

other than to know I am doing God's work." Thanks to the Feast, Dan says he decided to become an usher and eventually became a catechist in the parish school of religion, where he teaches the Confirmation students. "It was the Feast that brought me to all these things. I doubt I would have been drawn this strongly to the Faith otherwise."

During my time at the *Festa*, I observed each of the se young people, along with many of their comrades, work side by side for many months in various Feast and parish activities. They participated actively in the parish's liturgical life, assisted as volunteers on different committees, and ministered as lectors, Eucharistic ministers and catechists. Several of them volunteer in the parish's social justice ministries, which help obtain food and fair housing for underprivileged residents of the area.

Evaluation and Findings

It is my contention, after having observed the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Paulinus in Brooklyn, New York, that the educational visions of contemporary religious educators such as Maria Harris and Berard Marthaler find fruitful expression in the celebration of the Italian *Festa*. Contemporary religious educators have consistently emphasized, "whole community catechesis" while many in the parish have wondered, "What does this form of catechesis look like? Are there paths to implementing it that other parishes have found beneficial?" (Anslinger 2004, 6). Using the insights of these influential religious educators as well as significant Church documents, I will offer one effective path.

Religious Education as Socialization: The Vision of Berard Marthaler

The *Festa* serves as one concrete realization of Berard Marthaler's vision concerning socialization as a model for catechetics. Marthaler proposes that catechesis involves bringing the young "into the faith of a particular community by participation in the symbols, rites, values, and lifestyle of members. Religious education takes place in the interaction between learners and all activities and persons in their environment" (Elias 2002, 213).

In his essay, *Socialization as a Model of Catechetics*, Marthaler proposes that this socialization model has in fact, "been operative in the Christian community since two or three first gathered in together in Jesus' name. Insofar as it was an intentional process, socialization was traditionally called *catechesis*" (1978, 65). He argues that education in the faith must necessarily include more than simply instruction. The young person is brought into the Christian community not through the acquisition of theological facts and formulas. Rather, catechesis aims at forming the identity of the young person, which "emerges from the dialectic between the individual and society. In the course of appropriating the language, institutionalized values and objective meanings of a culture or society one acquires a sense of belonging" (1978, 71).

This socialization of the young into the community, "begins before the socializes are capable of normal reasoning, and in every case involves more than purely cognitive learning . . . the symbols that are the carriers of the traditions and meanings have rich connotations that speak to the whole person, not just the mind" (1978, 72). From this time of their youth, children are incorporated into a people by the people, not by formal, individualized instruction. Therefore, "in the framework of a faith community, catechesis becomes community education" (1978, 80). Significantly, Marthaler mentions Italian ethnic traditions as he notes that this catechesis begins

with the experiences of human community, “the family, the neighborhood, perhaps the ethnic tradition of a people like the Irish, Italians or Poles whose history was closely bound with the fortunes of Catholicism” (1978, 80).

This is precisely what I observed as a participant in the Brooklyn Feast. The young of the community receive no schooling in the tradition. They are integrated, from the time they are infants, into the values and beliefs of the Church community through active participation in every aspect of the community’s life. The result is a community of hundreds of youth and adults who constitute what they term a Feast family, actively participating in various aspects of parish life.

Fashioning a People: The Vision of Maria Harris

The Feast studied also serves as one fruitful expression of the vision elucidated in Maria Harris’ work, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. In this book, Harris proposes, “community and communion as the initial educational ministry” (1989, 75). Beginning with the Church community, the people, Harris maintains that comprehensive and lifelong Christian education takes place not solely or even primarily through schooling, but amidst the constant interplay of the five forms of teaching as seen in the early Church: koinonia, leiturgia, didache, kerygma and diakonia (1989, 44). Through the interplay of these forms, the fashioning of a people takes place.

Both the young and old of this Feast, in accord with Harris’ vision, are taught of these five forms not through instruction, but through profound experiences of community (koinonia), actively engaging in spirited parish liturgies and prayer (leiturgia), learning Catholic teaching through participation in various rituals (didache), publicly processing and proclaiming their faith (kerygma) and serving those in need (diakonia). In their lifelong commitment to Feast participation, those within the Feast domus live and pray together as a united community.

Of these five essential forms, Harris give pride of place to koinonia, arguing that there must be a people in existence before a people can be properly fashioned. The Feast examined in this study similarly emphasizes koinonia, as it is firmly rooted in a theology of community and communion. In fact, upon close examination of the theological underpinnings of the *Festa*, it becomes clear that lying at its source is a constant awareness of the intimate connection, a communion, that exists between the Divine and humanity and, flowing from this, the intimate connection that exists among believers. It was this notion of the intimate connectedness that exists among all participants that was consistently emphasized by various informants. In noting this theological foundation, “the major idea is that theology has deep implications for religious education and that a good theology leads to a good educational philosophy” (1995, 9).

Religious Education and Church Pronouncements

A perusal of significant Church documents offers two points that are of great import for this paper. First, the Church has endorsed, to a great extent, this contemporary move toward a broader vision of education as that which extends beyond schooling. Second, the Church has also recognized the value of utilizing popular religious traditions in pursuit of this communal approach. This second point, I contend, has been largely ignored, much to the detriment of contemporary religious education in the United States.

On the national level, several documents published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) are pertinent. In the 1972 document, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the bishops endorse the movement toward a broader, communal approach to religious education. They note,

Education is one of the most important ways by which the Church fulfills its commitment to the dignity of the person and the building of community. Community is central to educational ministry both as a necessary condition and an ardently desired goal. The educational efforts of the Church must therefore be directed to forming persons-in-community, for the education of the individual Christian is important not only to his solitary destiny but also to the destinies of the many communities in which he lives (*To Teach as Jesus Did*, 13).

The document then goes on to point out that such education embraces interlocking dimensions, such as didache, koinonia and diakonia, which together constitute one ministry (*To Teach as Jesus Did*, 14). Years later, the bishops affirmed that if this essential community is to be built, the young must be invited to participate in the life of the Church through liturgies, committees, traditional practices and societies. (*Sons and Daughters of the Light*, 33).

In a 1997 document, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, the bishops reiterate this commitment to communal education, adding that work with young persons in the Christian community must be, among other things, multicultural. Their comments on the incorporation of cultural and ethnic traditions into the ministry of the Church are particularly relevant for this paper. The bishops state,

Ministry with adolescents helps young people develop their identity by affirming and utilizing the values and traditions of their ethnic cultures . . . all ministry with adolescents needs to incorporate ethnic traditions, values, and rituals into ministerial programming . . . (*Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, 22-23)

On the universal level, Pope John Paul II's *Catechesi Tradendae* gives an important papal stamp of approval to the educative use of popular religious traditions. While he affirms more traditional methods which seek to impart specific theological knowledge (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 22), the Holy Father also affirms that catechesis is by no means restricted to the classroom. He mentions various instances in which education in the Faith takes place, noting specifically that,

Genuine catechists know that catechesis ‘takes flesh’ in the various cultures and milieus . . . Another question of method concerns the utilization in catechetical instruction of valid elements in popular piety. I have in mind devotions practiced by the faithful in certain regions with moving fervor and purity of intention, even if the faith underlining them needs to be purified or rectified in many aspects (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 53-54).

Finally, the Pontifical Council for Culture specifically notes local Feasts as expressions of popular piety that have traditionally been utilized by parishes as means of passing on the Faith. Such Feasts have historically helped to create, “a whole culture which effectively included everyone, a culture built on faith and organized around it” (*Toward a Pastoral Approach to*

Culture, 27). In light of these statements, contemporary educators would do well to consider the value of such popular religious traditions as the *Festa* as practical expressions of the theories expressed by Harris, Marthaler and these Church documents.

Limitations and Advantages of the Tradition

Surely, the use of the *Festa* tradition as a means of Christian religious education is not without its limitations. In some cases, for instance, individuals or families may not see the *Festa* as a means of socializing the young into the Church, but may view it simply as a cultural experience devoid of religious significance (Primeggia and Varacalli 1996, 423). In other cases, certain *Festa* celebrations may not be completely purged of certain superstitions or dehumanizing penitential practices that were prevalent in the earliest manifestations of the *Festa* (Carroll 1992, 133).

Despite these limitations, I maintain that the Italian *Festa*, while historically disparaged by some as a “mere” expression of popular religion, does in fact have potential for calling together community and fashioning a people who share a common vision and vocation. In a manner of speaking, the Feast forms a domestic Church, a domus to which the participants are intimately connected. It remains a powerful vehicle of education for the parishes in which it is utilized. The study of the Brooklyn Giglio Feast gives concrete evidence of this fact, as the community remains active and strong, with a proportionately high number of youth involved, side by side with adults, in the daily activities of the parish. Contrary to the perception of widespread indifference on the part of youth, the young people of this parish generally expressed sincere pride in their Catholic heritage and a high regard for the Church and the local community. Many of those who were incorporated into the Christian community by way of this Feast family have remained present and active well into their adulthood.

Educators in areas conducive to the continuation or perhaps revitalization of such popular religious practices can utilize this tradition as a means of fostering and sustaining community. Rather than viewing such traditions as distractions from the “real” work of education, these Feasts can assist educators in thinking outside the walls of the conventional classroom. They can give educators a context in which to engage in holistic, community based religious education. The Catholic Church has already called upon educators and theologians to explore such Feasts and assist in their revitalization in various communities, rather than viewing such an endeavor as primarily the work of folklorists or others not directly involved in ministry (*Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, 27).

Certainly, it must be acknowledged that not every individual community can simply begin to celebrate a Feast. Such an imposition of a foreign tradition would be detrimental to education and would serve to stifle the given community’s actual spirituality. Religious educators may then be tempted to point out that even if this particular tradition does possess value as a means of building and sustaining community and a context in which to engage in Christian education, its sphere of influence is severely limited. How might the religious educator who is not working in an Italian parish or near one of these many Feasts utilize the information contained herein?

The value of this study extends beyond only those who work in Italian-American parishes. The *Festa* tradition is one effective means of engaging in community catechesis and bringing to fruition many of the insights of educators such as Harris and Marthaler. With the

Festa tradition as a model, religious educators in various situations may seek to find similar potential within the popular religious devotions of the communities they serve.

In the United States, these communities are becoming increasingly diverse. As John Elias notes, “As the United States becomes a multi-cultural society . . . religious educators face even greater challenges” (2002, 259). As a growing percentage of Catholics in the United States are Hispanic, for example, educators can surely find expressions of popular religion within Hispanic culture that can be affirmed and celebrated. Hispanics share with other ethnic groups a profound devotion to the Virgin Mary and also possess some of their own unique popular religious expressions. In her work on the saints, Elizabeth Johnson makes special mention of this Hispanic popular piety and its potential. She notes,

In Latin America intense veneration of saints and of that special saint, Mary, continues to flourish . . . each locale has its own patron saint, often celebrated with a special festival day, and its own Marian image, title, and shrine which link the community to the great Mother of God . . . Despite scholarly attempt to label their behavior as ignorant or worse, millions of people have set about creating meaningful lives for themselves and their families in the company of their saints . . . The point is that devotion to saints works to build personal and communal meaning where life is desperately hard. . .” (1999, 13).

Johnson helps to secure the point that religious educators should value popular religious expressions, and that such community-building devotions are clearly not limited to those of Italian lineage.

Ethnic groups besides Hispanics are prevalent in the United States and express their devotion in manners unique to their culture. Additionally, educators may seek out traditional cultural practices that are not explicitly religious and yet use them in building community and engaging in education. Westerhoff, for example, specifically mentions the Hawaiian Luau as one example of this (2000, 10). Therefore, while this paper demonstrates to religious educators the educative potential of the traditional Italian *Festa*, it is also an invitation to explore popular religious practices in general and their potential in regard to education.

As educators in the United States minister among various ethnic groups and newly arriving peoples, this respect for popular religion can serve to give new immigrants a means to assert their identities. It can give other Americans, already established in this country, the ability to practice their Faith in a manner that is familiar to them, rather than imposing strictly American or strictly Western visions of the Catholic Faith. In short, popular religion gives voice to the unique identity and experiences of a specific people. Religious educators must respect and nourish this, while guiding and shaping it as well. Even in its official teaching the Catholic Church heartily endorses such an approach to contemporary religious education and catechesis, noting, “Besides sacramental liturgy and sacramentals, catechesis must take into account the forms of piety and popular devotion among the faithful” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1673).

In addition to permitting individual ethnic groups to voice their unique spirituality, embracing these popular religious practices can serve as a vehicle of unity among the different peoples to whom educators minister. In the Brooklyn Giglio Feast studied in this work, for example, common devotion to the Virgin of Mount Carmel brings together Italians, Poles,

Haitians and Hispanics on a regular basis. They process and pray together as one family throughout the year, particularly during the Feast.

Conclusion

In creating a strong sense of Christian communion among participants, the *Festa* celebrations transmit both religious beliefs and cultural values to the young and reinforce these values and beliefs within the lives of adults (Orsi 2002, 172). As contemporary religious educators seek new ways to build community and accommodate the many new groups approaching the promising shores of the United States, they would do well to consider the popular devotions of these groups. While disparaged in the past as a corruption of true religion, traditional devotions like the *Festa* possess an inherent theology of communion and catechesis on which educators may build.

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