

## EXPERIENCE AS BASIS FOR PASTORAL INTERACTION

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Contrary to the broad generalizations that the transcendent and spiritual dimensions to life are lost or diminishing in our contemporary society, there is evidence that many of the faithful understand that the meaning of their existence is linked to the nature of revelation and the relationship to God through grace and the presence of His Spirit in all of creation. It is true that such understandings may not be expressed in formal theological frameworks and terminology. Also, it is true that many such understandings that were formerly expressed in the traditions of ethnic and national origins are undergoing change in the way they are expressed and lived. This may be leading us to underappreciate how God is speaking and how people are listening and responding today.

It is not obvious from the history of religion, and certainly not in Christianity, that generally the human person spontaneously has tended to create the divine in his or her own image, reduced transcendence to human managements, and destroyed human values as if one had to choose between the glory of God and the glory of humanity (Michael J. Buckley, S.J., «*Atheism and Contemplation*,» *Theological Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 14 [December, 1979] pp. 680-699). Nor does it seem so today, except in those few instances in which tyrants, power driven business leaders and overly daring scientists attempt to usurp all sovereignty for themselves.

Given the great diversity of religious traditions and cultures in a nation such as the United States of America, one is truly challenged by the invitation to report on the foundational questions that have to do with meaning, mystery, faith and other related concepts. Admittedly, this problem is not new. Since its early days our Church has been challenged in its mission to minister to people of different cultures, languages, national origins and economic conditions.

What draws the people of different historical cultures together is the search for the common truth about human being, always related to the search for the truth about God and about the whole of creation (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in a speech on *Faith and Culture*, given in Salzburg, August 2, 1993, paraphrased from Vatican Information Service, No. 145, p. 2). There may be different starting points for people in that some persons may first focus on the psychological, or the ethnographic, or the needs of the family, or an enlightenment from faith that comes through prayer, et cetera. Whatever may be the various steps and journeys individuals undertake, they can and most often do arrive at a faith which is deep, personal and transcendent. It can be and is found, moreover, that the more humane a culture is, the more ennobling it is, the more will it be sensitive to that truth in faith which people seek and in which they hear God's voice. The more persons work through their personal discoveries and experiences and are open to grace, the better their opportunities are to enrich the culture, and realize that truth can be expressed in it for the good of all.

### **U.S.A. Culture and Appearance of Irreligion**

The basic shape of the mainstream culture in the United States was given by Protestant Christianity, not by the Catholic Church. Catholics remain a minority of the population even today. In this situation Catholics find certain basic attitudes and values which from our perspective are problematic. These should not always be attributed to a lack of religious faith but rather to the different shape of Christian faith in the Reformed Tradition. Catholics note among some of their Protestant friends, for example, their belief that they can have a relationship with Christ without having a relationship to the church, or continue to tolerate racism, or be less concerned about the social or community ills of society.

In viewing American films and television one could easily be misled by the secular and unchristian tone which focuses on domination of people, violence and greed. The capitalistic approach to business and the pragmatism of political processes, while at times problematic and on other occasions operating with a good communitarian spirit, sometime confuse even our own citizens into thinking that all is lost and no one listens to the voice of God. In fact there are some popular authors and commentators who promote for one reason, or another, the contention that there is only a massive deterioration and degeneration in American society. Such ideas are frequent at the conclusion of a century in many cultures. They are easy to write about, but reflect little hope and fewer solutions. Highly negative and critical emphases often are perceived by Catholics and other Christians to be a denial of the power of God's grace, a rejection of people who are truly struggling to live the Gospel, and a promotion of self-interests.

Despite all these forces, however, religious belief is alive and well for many American families. The quality of the critics' commentary depends to some measure on the kind of norms and criteria used, the scope of the study, and the true objectives of the person who comments or critiques.

## **Coping with Diversity**

Given the diversity of beliefs as in the United States, it is often more helpful to ask the question «*Who is Christ for us?*», than «*Who is Christ?*». Everyone comes to a text or teaching with his or her own experience, intelligence, judgement, preconceptions, and level of spiritual maturation. Everybody brings a cultural framework and colouring to the work of understanding and interpretation. No one comes to the conversation with a blank mind. To interpret means to use one's own preconceptions. To explain an action is to relate it to the underlying norms that make it possible. Meaning is not just something we recover, but something we struggle to produce or generate. The initial question mentioned opens the way to two different, but related, conversations.

First, there is the conversation of prayer, reflection and personal appropriation of the Word. In hearing the Word it is the hearer's life and world that are transformed. The Word has to be articulated in familiar language by the Christian community under the conditions of the present and emerging structures; the interpretation has to be directed to transformation of the present and not be merely a recovery of the past.

Second, today's Christian has to be open to conversations with people who represent a broad spectrum of beliefs and understandings and who live in an environment of massive institutional reorganization and change. It is through conversation that the relevance of the fundamental questions about life can emerge. Clarification, the making-real of the questions for people within their particular time and place, help to introduce the starting points to explore deeper meanings and connections.

## **The Human Experience**

If we are to speak of God to people today, an important place to begin is that which is most fundamental, and therefore common, in the everyday experiences of being human.

In the dominant cultures of the Southern United States, for example, one finds that ideas are the last things that one shares. First there must be an exchange of personal background information about family, place of origin, preferences in food, hobbies, mutual friendships, et cetera. Once this ritual is completed and a better trust level is established then what one thinks is shared. Ideas and thinking are not freely shared with strangers. One of the more successful starting points for speaking of God to people is a conversation about their family. Usually, one can experience the range of topics to include everything from recent crises and disappointments all the way to the remote history of the family. In this experience we hear the native voice, the values, and the questions which can open the way to speaking of God. The workplace, too, is an effective place for exchange. In this setting, however, the time span of the engagement is necessarily shortened. What is talked about in such settings? The starting points are whatever is of high value, interest or concern to the individual participants in the conversation. In this approach the process is perceived to be more personalized and human.

It is in sharing such experiences and conversations that many opportunities come for initiating dialogue or conversation flowing from the foundational experiences of life. The question provoked by the Pentecost proclamation is not «*What is entailed in it?*» but rather the deeply existential question, «*What then must we do?*» (Acts 2:37).

People seeking to find God today look for an interactive style of discovery. If the approach of those acting in the name of the Church assumes the posture of first emphasizing that they alone are in full possession of the correct names for those deep experiences of human life, names which people can not possibly find on their own without revelation as it is presented in the Church's tradition and theology, then the response of those persons who are searching is often withdrawal. The personal sharing in the search, the resourcing with truth as the subject's needs require it, and the compassionate understanding and patience with the searcher all help in the discovery of meaning and the Word. It is within this context of experiences that one can more effectively explore peoples' criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, Nos. 19-21).

The challenge ever before us is that we hear the Word more fully ourselves, since we are servants of the Word, and not its masters. The continuing process of inspiration, discovery and discernment remains ever on our own agendas as members of the faithful seeking meaning and fulfilment in the Word. The faith of believers must be demonstrative as well as declarative.

While a believer's personal witnessing to the Word always remains the most inspirational and effective means of helping other persons who are in search of truth, meaning and love, the Word also can be discovered through a variety of media organized to present it.

Guided by the Holy Spirit those who have gone before us have assembled warehouses full of prayerful reflections, pastoral experiences, scholarly works, biographies of saintly people, histories, and works of related

arts and sciences. Our libraries are filled with large volumes of books, documents and periodicals on the truths of faith. Contemporary scholars carry on their traditions of study - the acquisition of knowledge, its verification, its promulgation, and its further development, application and management. Great insights and reflections on the Word over the years have come out of an elaborate and articulate discourse about the problems of each age. Collegial participation among people who understood the problems and sensed how the fabric of thought was not working have provided solutions.

### **The Mission and the Challenge**

One of our major challenges is how such a vast reservoir of accumulated truth, inspiration, and dynamics can more readily be made known and available to a larger number of people all over the global community. How can we improve the heart of what we are about: sharing the Good News that enables the human spirit, engenders the learning of truth in faith, fosters Christian Community, calls people into the service of other people, and invites worship in the Lord Jesus Christ and faith in Him.

There are many ways in which we can help to enhance hearing the Word and reading the signs of the times. As mentioned earlier, personal witness is paramount; prayer is essential, the living proclamation of the Word can never be abandoned. There are also some new or reclaimed ways to introduce and enrich the hearing and understanding the Good News today.

Five additional challenges that one might mention are (1) benefits from the newer computer technologies; (2) conversations with scientists; (3) a recommitment to the fine arts; (4) the further explorations of ethnographic studies and; (5) a more systematic evaluation of outcomes of our efforts to share the Word.

Some examples can be given from the first two headings.

It is possible now to have the *New Testament* on the Sony electronic book player and printer that can be connected to a personal computer screen and is indexed to the word level. It is possible to have the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on an electronic "Smart Card." It is possible to speed up the work of translations via computer technology.

Another phenomenon that has emerged in connection with computer networking, E-Mail, Voice Mail, and the like is enabling scholars to exchange information, offer critique, resource each other and offer affirmation on a daily basis, if needed or desired. Interesting by-products are emerging from such discourses: (1) more open sharing (self disclosure of ideas and values), (2) more honest and fuller critique, and (3) better preparation for plenary sessions and meetings. It does not take a lively imagination to appreciate the value of what such networking could do for theologians, religious educators and pastors.

Contemporary indifference to the Word of God in the scientific culture of the United States, and I suspect elsewhere, does not emerge from an argument for the freedom of physics from theological assertions as in the past, nor for the development of the human above the present state of humanity. Rather, it arises from a climate of mind which both segregates religious thought from serious inquiry and makes authority of experience depend upon its codification in those experimental methods that took their rise from the physical and biological sciences. Religious denial or apathy or contempt or disinterest in the intellectual culture is far too unexplored theologically and pastorally to present the precision of a question or a set of questions. This means that our immediate task is not to attempt answers, which would be in any case inescapably premature. We must first clarify the religious problem that is hidden or unarticulated within the intellectual culture and discover what is still indeterminately contradictory to belief (Michael J. Buckley, S.J., «*Experience and Culture: A Point of Departure for American Atheism,*» *Theological Studies*, Vol. 50, [1989] p. 459). We can achieve this in part by entering into dialogues and collaborative inquiry with scientists, philosophers of science, theologians and various other scholars. Gradually and cooperatively we can explore the epistemological, ethical and ontological questions in such dialogues.

### **Conclusion**

In succeeding generations our Church has had to deal with one kind of "ism" or another. There have been all kinds of attempts to interrupt or distort the Word. In our age we must remain strong in faith and the hope that the answers we need will continue to come. We are obliged to remain open to God's revelation and to all people who are in need of His voice.

The intimate disciples of Jesus, who had at first preached only to Jews inevitably came into greater contact with Gentiles, had to face the problem--for whom was the message of Jesus intended? The answer, of course, was everyone. Throughout the history of our faith Christians have been aware of their duty to transmit the faith to everyone. There is also evidence that Church leaders and the faithful when confronted with various

erroneous teachings, cultural challenges or inadequate resources have by the grace of God addressed the problem, found the solution and experienced a deeper presence of the Spirit's guiding power. The same Holy Spirit guides the faithful and us in our search for the Word in the midst of today's many other voices. Sometimes we can be entrapped with a siege or ghetto mentality and underestimate God's power to guide us to a solution. Many of the faithful see the need for the Church to continue to translate anew what the Church knows to be the Word. We have to think of better ways to proclaim and let ourselves be open to searching and creating solutions, but always holding on to the truth of faith in Jesus Christ.

Contribution to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 1994.