

Ministry for a New Culture

In a provocative article entitled “Religion and the Shape of National Culture,” sociologist Robert Bellah argued that the Protestant regard for the sacredness of the individual conscience has been tightly woven into our culture. This, together with what he calls a near exclusive focus on the relation between Jesus and the individual and a prevailing economic belief that a free market is the solution to all our problems, has made it hard for Americans to understand the idea of the common good, much less engage in conversation about it. Few of us are securely plugged into anything. Our institutions are weak, providing us with little or no sense of solidarity. He quotes Robert Wuthnow to say that we have become a culture of “loose connections” (Wuthnow, 199).

Bellah believes that the remedy for this is an infusion of what Andrew Greeley has described as the “Catholic imagination.” Bellah calls for the reconstitution of our cultural code through greater attention to the sacramental life, in particular the Eucharist. Absorbing the Eucharist and becoming Eucharist for others, Bellah concludes, is the way to open up our cultural code so that the sacramental imagination will have a more pervasive influence over our lives.

As president of a Roman Catholic school of theology for ministry, I would like to see the Church’s ministry play a critical role in this project of opening up our cultural code. But before the ministry can have a lead in the work of infusing the culture with the “Catholic imagination,” those who exercise pastoral care need to do some reconnecting themselves. Bellah states that what needs changing is deeper than ideology or policy analysis. And he claims that the very concreteness of sacramental worship is difficult even for American Catholics to understand. Restoring an appreciation of the sacraments as actions “that pull us into an embodied world of relationships and connections” will require a ministry that believes that such relationships and connections are the center of gospel life. If the culture is to become less individualized through the power of the sacraments, then the world of religion must become less private and domestic. Pastors can deepen the impact of our sacramental celebration and call us to a greater sense of the common good if theirs is a ministry that is politically focused, professional, and marked by piety.

POLITICAL FOCUS

The Church is an extension of the Lord because like the Incarnate Word, the mission of the Church is to share in the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the world. The Church is called to speak a word of salvation to such a world. This proclamation is compromised in an individualistic culture such as ours when ministry is respected to the degree that it cultivates a private spirituality and is disconnected from meaningful public discourse and public decision-making. This proclamation is compromised when we are slow to develop clear and effective ways of preaching and teaching the kinds of values needed if a critical duty of discipleship, making the kingdom of God a reality in the world, is to be fulfilled.

In the last several decades as religion became more and more marginal to the things that matter to people, the Church's ministry became part of the problem by gradually withdrawing from the public square. The political character of ministry increasingly diminished as ministry became more therapeutic. Scripture, the Church's social teaching, and preaching remained a part of the curriculum for ministry, but the courses considered more practical were those that enhanced skills for counseling and good listening. Unpuzzling the culture or understanding the world of work receded as goals of effective ministry.

The task of infusing the culture with the "Catholic imagination" will need a leadership that has rediscovered a political focus. This will not be easy. "Political" has gotten an unsavory connotation. In a culture of "loose connections," we treat government as a necessary evil. Conventional wisdom too readily believes that the "political" person is manipulative and partisan simply because that person is busy about the affairs of our public life. We need to reassert the fact that political action is engagement in the affairs of the *polis*, the city, the community. Political action is action that witnesses to our social nature, to the fact that it is not good for us to be alone. Humankind is meant for community, and communities need organization and order. Promoting the development of connections that make for a just social order is a care pastors need to reclaim as central to ministry. Ministry meant to deepen the sacramental imagination will need to be a ministry that sees a role for itself in the processes of good citizenship.

A place to begin the work of helping ministers redevelop a political sensibility is the educational environment itself. Every school of ministry pays attention to the place it holds in the ecclesiastical world and in the world of higher education. It matters to schools that they do the things that gain the confidence and esteem of church leaders and fellow educators. These are appropriate concerns. The same interest needs to be given to securing the confidence and esteem of the communities

in which schools for ministry are located. Many of us promote ourselves by advertizing the benefits that come from education in Washington, Chicago, Boston, or Berkeley. But would the reverse be true? What kind of citizenship does the teaching and learning community exercise?

Promoting a political role for the school for ministry will also promote a change in the way ministers perceive their congregations. A congregation of adult men and women is not simply a gathering of spouses or parents. These adults are also workers and citizens. They are protagonists of a life beyond the home. Ministers can promote the infusion of a sacramental imagination when they acknowledge the complexity to which that imagination needs to be applied. Ministers also need to rediscover the tools of pastoral care that equip a minister to have a credible political presence. The Scriptures, preaching, the history of the Church, and mission keep the student for ministry aware that an essential practice of pastoral care is public leadership.

PROFESSIONAL

When I was a formation director for my religious congregation, I began each year by stressing the professional nature of our life and work, and each year, the men found it hard to digest my message. In their minds the professional is the company man in the grey flannel suit, the embodiment of bourgeois values.

Professionalism has nothing to do with self-service and mediocrity. Precisely the opposite. The professional is one whose knowledge and skill is publicly recognized as necessary for public life. Professionals are graduates of specified programs of study, are tested for proficiency, and examined for character. Licensing and certification attest that the professional has both character and competence for the public's expectation. Before one practices his or her craft, a profession is made to work on behalf of the common good. Associations of professionals set standards for excellence. Procedures are established to retain and support qualified practitioners and to eliminate those whose character and competence fall below grade. And professionals are accountable for who they were and what they did.

Recent episodes of ministerial sexual misconduct have caused tremendous dismay and disappointment among people, a sign that the public holds ministers to a particular standard of character. Ministers realize this. But ministers also need to realize that public trust and respect depend not only on character but competency. The lack of confidence some have for the ministry as a public responsibility is in some measure due to the irrelevance of the ministry to the everyday lives of people, an irrelevance rooted in a lack of competence. Ministers who lack knowledge to address the challenging issues of the day from the

perspective of the Church's rich scriptural and theological tradition diminish the professional standing of the ministry in the public eye.

Competence is not only a matter of having appropriate knowledge. Skill in bringing that knowledge to bear on the things that matter to people is also needed. We are familiar with the distaste people have for physicians who treat diseases and not persons. A physician's inability to bring a patient into the process of his or her own treatment is a disability. So too with the ministry. A ministry sensitive to the need for connectedness is also sensitive to the need for people to think through the difficulties and questions necessary for solid connections to be made. One of the necessary skills of a ministry able to promote a Catholic imagination is the skill of helping people to think theologically. The art of pastoral care is enabling a community to make sense of its life with God as that life is lived in the complexity of history.

PIETY

Dictionary definitions given for piety include "pretentious" and "sanctimonious." Among the Romans, however, *pietas* defined a sense of duty and devotion. The comparable Hebrew word is *hesed* or "steadfast loyalty." Rome did not put Christians to death because emperors found their theology distasteful. Christians were executed when they refused to participate in the public rites that marked one as a dutiful and devout citizen. In Christian spirituality piety is a gift of the Holy Spirit promoting affection for God and loving regard for others.

If a Catholic imagination is to take hold of our culture, there is a need for piety. A culture of solidarity is a culture that has the capacity for steadfast loyalty, devotedness, and duty. It is a culture free from the fear of commitment, a fear that keeps us individual and incapable of the common good.

One who knew this well was Vaclav Havel, the playwright who became president of Czechoslovakia after the "Velvet Revolution" (and subsequently the Czech Republic after the Republic and Slovakia decided to go their separate ways). Havel gave the customary New Year's Day presidential address to his country in 1991. Noting that in years past the country's Communist leaders had trumpeted the grand accomplishments of socialism which everyone in the country knew to be false, Havel said that he would tell the truth, and this is what he said:

. . . . we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only about ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility, or forgiveness lost their depth and dimension, and for many of us they represented only

psychological peculiarities, or they resembled gone-astray greetings from ancient times, a little ridiculous in the era of computers and spaceships . . . (Weigel, 1992).

Havel told his fellow citizens that the sad legacy of their past forty years was a sin they visited on themselves. Holding the people responsible for their own oppression seemed like a case of “blaming the victim.” But Havel went on to tell the story of a green-grocer who everyday put the sign “Workers of the World, Unite!” in his window, not because he believed it but because it was his declaration that he was afraid and wanted to be left alone. As a result he helped create a “web of mendacity,” a culture where appearances tried to pass for reality. The action of the green-grocer had been multiplied over so many thousands of times that fear was the order of the day. It built a culture of the lie.

Mendacity is a serious threat to ministry. The fear of offending the sensibilities of a bishop or superior, the fear of public opinion, the “bad conscience” developed when the undereducated minister lacks confidence in the power of his teaching all create an appearance that is a lie.

The piety needed in a ministry that will lead us in developing a sacramental imagination is not sanctimony or pretension. It is the devotion and duty of the apostles who were not afraid to confront the traditions of their ancestors for the sake of this new thing God was doing. It is the steadfast loyalty to truth exemplified by the theologians of our own century who, despite their silencing, made it possible for Vatican II to help the Church engage the modern world. It is the duty of the many martyrs of the developing world who refused to abandon justice or live a denial of human dignity by complying with political and economic systems that savaged the poor. This is the piety that refuses to accept appearances for reality. The piety needed for a ministry that will help our culture reconnect is a piety that makes us bold, free from the fear that keeps us trapped in worlds of our own convenience and comfort.

CONCLUSION

Havel said that his people needed to name the situation they had created. They had to come to realize what they had done to create the oppression under which they lived. And if they did this, he said, “hope will return to our hearts.”

Bellah gives voice to a yearning felt by many. The human person is built for community and solidarity. Because the culture of “loose connections” is ultimately a denial of who we are, it is a lonely culture. Pastors who are steadfastly loyal to the truth, who see themselves accountable for a witness that is competent, and who do not shrink from

public leadership will be the ones who minister to us the hope that our hearts desire.

REFERENCES

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Daniel McLellan, O.F.M., was recently inaugurated as the fourth president of Washington Theological Union.

It is the ministers of evangelization who come from the North American cultural reality who first of all need to be evangelized in relation to the materialism, individualism, and hedonism of North American culture. To the degree that we neglect to evangelize North American culture, we will never truly evangelize the Hispanics in this country. Rather, we will impose the values of North American culture in the name of the gospel.

—Virgil Elizondo