

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 42

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Bishop Robert F. Vasa

How do we treat the people we love? Do we demonstrate genuine concern for their spiritual and material wellbeing at the sacrifice of ourselves? Or do we leave behind a trail of conflict, anger, loss of faith, and resentment? Are those the fruits of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul commended to us? Of course, the answer is clear. The pastoral imperative is to live for the sake of others and embody True Love. A correlative principle can be drawn from the writings of Hippocrates, "first, do no harm." Sadly, when the Inquisition starts to roll, love is its first casualty and harm, the result.

The employment contracts for teachers in the Diocese of Santa Rosa always included a statement that teachers would not teach, advocate, model, or encourage beliefs or behaviors contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church. In practice, though teachers may have been gay, used contraception, or supported abortion rights and euthanasia, they kept these behaviors or views to themselves. In particular, science or math classes never needed to be concerned about crossing any theological lines drawn in the sand. The humanities and theology presented different challenges, as did physical education, which often provided a health segment in the curriculum. However, in all of my years at Newman, I never knew of any teacher openly advocating positions contrary to Catholic moral doctrine.

When a contract addendum appeared on the horizon, it came as a shock to faculty throughout the diocese. The document, drawn up by Bishop Vasa, required each teacher to affirm that contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia are "modern errors" which "gravely offend human dignity." My first response was, "what about capital punishment?" While I agreed with the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, clearly the list reflected a political bias and was being drawn up for an audience broader than the diocese itself.

Since coming to the diocese, Bishop Vasa's doctrinaire approach and pastoral failings had precipitated an even more dramatic decline in diocesan finances than had occurred after the scandals a decade earlier. By putting the Diocese of Santa Rosa front and center in the culture wars, he attracted the attention of wealthy conservative Catholic donors, both in the diocese and nationwide. He had used the same tactics in his prior diocese, when he stripped a hospital of its right to denominate itself as "Catholic" after it allowed its surgeons to perform tubal ligations in specific and limited health circumstances. There are many avenues through which to address matters like these, but Bishop Vasa had found that open confrontation that generated media outrage also stimulated the flow of conservative dollars.

My experience with Catholic educators is that they are persons of conscience. They choose to teach in a private religious institution that pays significantly less and offers fewer benefits than do public schools, because they embrace the importance of spirituality in education and desire to participate in a community

centered on God. Even if doctrinal disagreement or differences in moral theology might arise, teachers kept these to themselves and respected the boundaries of Catholic dogma.

But this addendum required more: a positive affirmation of beliefs in accordance Catholic doctrine. I was torn: while I remained personally aligned with Catholic moral imperatives, in this instance, the bishop was "crushing the bruised reed." Young teachers with families suddenly were put in the position to oppose the use of contraception, when in fact, the only way they could afford to teach at a Catholic school was by using birth control. There were faculty members with married gay children who risked permanently alienating them by signing. Since I served on the board as a faculty representative, I had faculty members come to me for consultation in tears, because of family conflict, and the crisis of personal faith and conscience this addendum unleashed. Our school president at the time, Mike Truesdell, stood his ground against the bishop, and attempted to negotiate different wording, to no avail. The turning point came when pastors throughout the diocese began to quietly oppose the bishop and counsel him against imposing the addendum. When the former chaplain of Cardinal Newman, now a pastor of a large parish, publicly stated that he would not require teachers working in his parish school to sign the addendum, it made the news and the bishop caved.

A similar drama unfolded in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, with similar results. However, Archbishop Cordileone and Bishop Vasa had largely achieved what they had sought: the spotlight and center stage in the culture wars and turning on the spigot for conservative Catholic money.

Instead of a contract addendum, Bishop Vasa decided that the faculty should be "catechized" over a three year period. Once a semester, every teacher and administrator in the diocese was required to attend a two hour presentation, taught by the bishop himself, on the doctrine and traditions of the Catholic faith. While many of the faculty groaned at the thought, I looked forward to engaging the bishop on theological ground. Though I had profound concerns about his pastoral style and doctrinaire approach, I found Bishop Vasa to be sincere and deeply committed to his episcopal responsibility.

As this conflict unfolded, the diocesan school superintendent, John Collins, had made it his personal vendetta to oust Cardinal Newman's president, Mike Truesdell from his position. There's a quip about the Irish: their strain of Alzheimer's is to forget everything but grudges. Collins had a bad case of this. Mike Truesdell had resisted the diocese and he was going to pay - but not in any direct confrontation. Truesdell was an immensely successful administrator, loved and respected by parents, students, faculty, and the alumni. He was a magnet for money and he had successfully established a foundation to build Newman's assets over the long term. Donors who otherwise were alienated from the diocese, saw Newman as an institution worthy of their support and directed their gifts accordingly. Moreover, Mike had stimulated the faculty to take an intellectual interest in John Henry Newman's writings and thought. He gave a biography of Newman to each faculty member and encouraged us to study it. As a result, Truesdell had established both a formidable internal and external foundation within the Newman community.

So, rather than directly fire the effective and popular Truesdell, Collins was determined to make his continued tenure miserable. Such was the Christian heart animating the superintendent. After all the turmoil the diocese and school community had endured, John Collins set about subjecting us to more harm. As Mr. Kamiyama would say, "resentment is poison."