

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 41

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As we raise our own children and grandchildren within the Unificationist tradition, there are many lessons to be drawn from the successes and failures of other religious traditions. In that regard, I think the following can serve as a case study for our own educational policies and practices.

Cardinal Newman High School was first and foremost a spiritual community. The day began with a school wide prayer and inspirational reading over the intercom, led by two students from the Campus Ministry class. The entire school, faculty and students, concluded the prayer together, saying aloud a quote from John Henry Newman, "God shall call on me and I will hear the Lord." Mass was celebrated often during the year, and the students in Campus Ministry, along with the various Theology classes, took part in designing the liturgies. Many benefits accrued from having such a high degree of student involvement, the young men and women inherited the spiritual tradition expressed in the celebration and had buy-in, dramatically lessening the likelihood of distraction or disruption. These liturgies tended to be joyful and inclusive, with upbeat music. The sermons and prayers were always thematically relevant to the lives and interests of the students.

An important element of Newman spirituality was the weekly faculty prayer service on Wednesday mornings. Once a month, the chaplain would say Mass during this time, but otherwise, different faculty members would lead the service. As the teachers came from many different backgrounds and religious traditions, the services never failed to be interesting and inspirational. The atmosphere was such that I could freely speak of my days on MFT, and share stories of challenge and overcoming. One of the teachers came from the Church of Latter Day Saints and had served two years as a missionary. Like our Unification members, he had a rich trove of experience to draw upon. These services were such that we all looked forward to them - the prayer and sharing drew us close to each other and brought alive Newman's motto of "cor ad cor loquitur," heart speaks to heart.

When Bishop Vasa arrived and changed the school chaplain, an immediate shift occurred in the spirit of the school. A chill set in. The creativity of the student-led liturgies became an immediate casualty. The new chaplain ("He who must not be named") viewed the Mass less as a shared offering made by the laity and the priest, and more as an offering made by the priest which the laity attended. The difference was dramatic. Many shifts in attitude flowed from this changed perspective. Rather than be joyful, students were to assume an aspect of reverent silence and spiritual reflection - a shift in mood and tone enforced by roving administrators who passed out detention slips to any student disrespectful enough to softly talk with a friend. The sermons became lectures on the meaning of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and rather than communicating inspirational and relevant themes, the chaplain hectorated the congregation of faculty and students. Kids began to refer to the chaplain as "Father Scold."

In the aftermath of the Ziemann-Keys scandal, I observed to my friend Father Loren that, "every generation of Catholic clergy creates a new generation of Protestants." Anyone who has spent any time among young people, especially teenagers, could have easily predicted the response of the students. Rebellion. Religion always holds a precarious place in the lives of young people. The faculty constantly

looked for avenues of approach to evangelize our students, to open their hearts to faith and to God. Through our collective experience, we had become "wise as serpents and guileless as doves." We deeply loved our Newman spiritual community and sought to make it attractive to draw our students into authentic participation, through dialogue and community service. Even our more secularly minded faculty members recognized the relational value of maintaining the spiritual health of our community and worked to draw kids into it. Over my years of teaching, I found that students gravitated towards the teacher most suitable to their individual character as their avenue of connection.

All of this was being undone as the faculty felt increasingly unable to support the chaplain, and certainly unwilling to sacrifice their own creditability with their students to do so. With impeccable timing, the chaplain then announced that the Wednesday morning prayer would henceforth be a Mass. This drove a stake into the heart of our spiritual community. Faculty would no longer be able to share their hearts or insights, and those on the faculty who were not Catholic or divorced (thus unable to receive communion) immediately felt as though they had been sidelined and made unwelcome - which made the Catholic teachers even angrier at the chaplain. A number of us stopped receiving communion in solidarity with those on the faculty being "disinvited" from the table.

Other changes quickly followed. Theology classes taught by several new priests and religious became increasingly conservative and ultra-orthodox. Subject matter that previously had been handled in a sensitive pastoral manner - in consideration of the psychological health of our students, their family situations, their struggles with sex and sexual orientation, and the many children with divorced parents - suddenly became dogmatic, legalistic, and abrasive. This, of course, resulted in more acting out, more disrespect, and more rebellion. It became the exceptional student who did not nurse some sense of indignant disdain to these changes in school climate.

The young are highly sensitive to the hypocrisy of their elders. Bishop Vasa and his Newman chaplains, when surveying the pantheon of sins, seemed particularly vocal in their condemnation of homosexuality. Considering the scandal plagued history of the diocese and the fact that the conservative estimate for the number of gay American priests is around 60% - and higher among religious orders like the Jesuits, Franciscans, or Marists - the heightened emphasis on this particular human failing provided the students with plenty of fuel for their scorn. But more significantly, by placing such an emphasis on homosexuality, the clergy had removed it from the pastoral to the ideological and political realm, further alienating students from the Catholic Church and throwing several young people in crisis. Our counselors became very busy. Again, the spiritual community suffered as teachers felt protective of their more vulnerable students and less inclined to support Bishop Vasa's leadership of the school.

And the beat goes on.... Students in their sophomore year took two Theology courses, World Religions and Church History, each one semester long. The courses were the most popular in the Theology curriculum. In particular, in this age of heightened cultural and religious conflict, the material taught introduced students to other peoples and their beliefs, deepened the students' understanding, and broadened their horizons. We had kids who immigrated from South Asia, North Africa, or the Middle East, and hosted foreign exchange students. The World Religions course often gave them the opportunity to disclose more about themselves and their families, further strengthening the bonds of our community.

The new chaplain began to agitate for the removal of these two courses, which he intended to replace by a year-long course on the Catechism and Sacramental theology. The faculty pushed back. This material already received attention in the existing theology curriculum, and without exception, every teacher but the chaplain felt the loss of World Religions and Church History would hurt the students academically. Moreover, these were the only two courses in our theology department accredited within the University of California system. Of course, the bishop had his way, despite the opposition and concern of the faculty, and these courses were dropped.

The new Archbishop of San Francisco, Salvatore Cordileone, is a more sophisticated and erudite conservative than Bishop Vasa, but every bit as narrowly orthodox and reactionary. In concert, they devised a strategy to meet the resistance of their increasingly disaffected school faculties. And so began the next act of this ongoing drama.