

## My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 43

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*Michael "Mike" Truesdell, President Holy Cross High School*

After enduring several years of mistreatment by a vindictive superintendent, Newman's president, Mike Truesdell resigned. The Jesuits immediately snatched him up to be president of a high school back in Ohio. The Society of Jesus knows talent when they see it. Since that time, Mike has continued to do the Lord's work in a stellar fashion first in Ohio, and then later, New York. The financial pressures of maintaining a private religious school have increased as professed religious have decreased in numbers. Paying lay faculty a living wage, one sufficient to support a family, has proven more challenging than sustaining a faculty composed of men and women working under the vow of poverty. Ursuline, the all girls school next door to Newman succumbed to these pressures and closed in the spring of 2011. Most of the young women came over to Newman for the fall semester. Mike Truesdell performed magnificently, organizing the expansion of Newman from a testosterone charged school of 400 young men to a refined coed institution of nearly 700 souls. The logistical and cultural challenges were immense, but under Mike's talented leadership, we successfully transitioned.

All of this occurred while Bishop Vasa energetically attempted to generate a Counter-Reformation and his superintendent, John Collins, with breathtaking arrogance, obstructed many of the more productive plans of Truesdell and the Newman Board. I worked closely with Mike and enjoyed his confidence, often acting in the capacity of an informal legal counsel. That the Newman administration and faculty rose to the challenges of the moment speaks highly of their virtue, spirit of sacrifice, and commitment to religious education. However, rather than being recognized by the bishop or superintendent, they scolded us for being insufficiently "Catholic."

When Mike left, with his imprimatur, I applied for the job of president. I knew from the outset, that without the support of the superintendent or Bishop Vasa, I would never be seriously considered. Even with strong backing from the board, alumni, donors, and faculty, I was too much the protege of Mike Truesdell to be selected as his successor. Fully aware of this, I still undertook the effort and endured the lengthy process of interviews and submitting varied written statements. My intention was to set out a vision for the school to help guide us into the future and to encourage the board to be more proactive in protecting the community interest in the face of Superintendent Collins' negative influence. Despite the odds against me, I felt I was the person best suited for the job. I had served on the board prior to teaching, handled the Newman assets at the Catholic Community Foundation, knew many of the largest donors personally - and had taught their children - was active in the greater community, and was a faculty member and aquatics coach for years. Moreover, my years as a lawyer provided me with the skill sets necessary for interaction with the city, county, and state. Finally, I enjoyed a lively bond of heart with John Henry Newman, and Bishop Vasa did not intimidate me. After years on MFT being trained by the Messiah, I felt adequate to the task of representing the best interests of the school.

It was not to be. I walked into the room for my final interview and tallied the votes in my head. Between the religious, the chaplain, and the superintendent, the election committee was stacked in the bishop's favor - and I most definitely was out of favor. I decided to take the opportunity to challenge the superintendent's disruptive influence on our academic and financial affairs, hoping to influence the sentiments of the board members who were present and to stiffen their resolve vis a vis the chancery. After years of witnessing the mistreatment of Mike Truesdell, I finally had a venue in which I could voice the concerns of the faculty and call into question policies and behaviors which had negatively affected the school. I did so respectfully but firmly and persistently.

The superintendent not only did not want to hire me, he wanted to fire me. However, I was the trustee for the estate of a priest who had left all of his assets to charity. Because of his dissatisfaction with the Bishop of Santa Rosa, he had left half of his estate, nearly \$2 million, to the Sonoma Community Foundation.

Catholic Charities, Kairos, and Cardinal Newman were to receive the remaining \$1.9 million. The logical vehicle for these gifts was the Catholic Community Foundation. However, as executor, I could argue that another foundation would better steward the gift and more adequately respect the donor's intentions. I already had begun discussions with Bishop Vasa and the diocese about the disposition of the estate. I am convinced that my role as trustee of this substantial sum protected me from any retribution. Nothing speaks to the heart of clerics like money.

Not surprisingly, John Collins neither forgave nor forgot my interview performance.

After our initial two experiences of catechesis in which the Auxiliary Bishop of San Francisco, Thomas Daly first spoke, followed by Bishop Vasa a few months later, I drafted the letter of response below, hoping to engage in a dialogue. I stirred the chancery hornet nest.

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Dear Bishop Vasa,

Thank you very much for taking the time to present your thoughts to diocesan educators these past months. I and others would very much have liked to engage you in dialogue on a few points, but the structure of the presentations and your concern for the time restraints of the faculty, prevented us from raising questions. Thus, I am taking the liberty of continuing the conversation by letter, as well as raising related issues.

#### 1. Did God Place a Literal Fruit in the Garden to Test Adam and Eve?

In your presentation, you assigned a literal interpretation to the story in Genesis of the Fall, the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" and the choices made by Adam and Eve regarding its fruit. In your reading of the text, you interpret the actions of God as a "test" in an environment of "perfect justice." This literal reading yields many good lessons: discernment of spirits, obeying God, assuming responsibility, and Augustine's observation on repentance. Yet, the Catechism informs us that there needs to be an interpretive "concordance" between the different senses of scripture as we read (115). It is on this ground that I raise a question.

The Church teaches us that all children deserve the unchanging love of their human parents (2227). If this is a birthright in the human family, what ought we to expect from the absolute and unconditional love of God, our Parent? With this truth in mind, we find a literal reading deficient in its primary premise: no loving parent would test his or her children at the cost of their lives. To characterize the Genesis story in this manner mischaracterizes the nature of God. The central axis of the creation is the parent-child relationship. Jesus teaches us to call God "our Father." Thus, when reading Genesis, we ought to take into account the character of God's love when interpreting its stories.

An interpretive reading of the text invites us to consider the nature of the human person when exploring the topic of Original Sin. It would be helpful to examine the symbols found in the story in light of the human condition: in other words, what do the two trees, the fruit, and the serpent represent when considered in terms of the human desire for love and the realization of our original purpose? This course of inquiry can be pursued in a manner consistent with the human experience of parenting and family.

#### 2. Theology and Science

The second issue I would like to raise arises from the first. By focusing on a "literal fruit" as a test of our first parents, we need to suspend our reason and disregard the lessons we have learned from science. The Church has recognized that the scientific exploration of the origins of the universe can coexist with faith. Pope Benedict was most forceful in his willingness to respect the process of scientific inquiry. For instance, one might say that evolution unfolds according to an inherent principle that originates in God. If God's energy is the origin of being, God's essential character will be seen through the study of the resulting universe. Actually, this is stated by Paul in Romans when he writes, "the invisible power and deity of God can be seen in all things that were made." Thus, in science, researchers are examining the effects and deriving an understanding of the cause by means of their God given reason.

The truth of God is consistent, internally and externally. God is not a contradictory being. Therefore, as complementary fields of inquiry, science and theology enrich each other. Theology comfortably defers to science as it explores its appropriate realm, the material world. Likewise, science needs to adhere to theology in its moral role, defining human ethics and purpose in light of a loving God. It is important in these skeptical and materialistic times, that the Church maintain its intellectual credibility and relevance by not calling into question, or worse dismissing, the pursuit of understanding through the scientific method. Rather, the appropriate posture on both sides ought to be one of respectful dialogue in which the understandings of science and theology are engaged to improve the material and moral conditions of our human community.

### 3. Mortifying Our Curiosity

As a teacher, my vocation calls me to awaken my students to the wonder of our existence and a profound sense of awe at the reality of our consciousness in an ever-expanding cosmos. My hope is that I will cultivate in each of my students a profound curiosity as to the meaning and purpose of their existence, so that they will grow to be conscientious, responsible men and women who spend a lifetime in the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. The Blessed John Henry Newman envisioned an educated Catholic laity that would be able to take its place in the world and influence the course of human society and history in a constructive and even providential manner. In the 21st Century, Newman's vision has been realized beyond anything he could have imagined in the 19th. Without "curiosity" the advances in social justice--Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Worker's Rights, to name three--profoundly influenced by lay Catholics, might never have occurred. We know from historical experience, locally, nationally, and globally, that curiosity is the bedfellow of moral and legal accountability.

Thus, as an educator, I find your exhortation to "mortify our curiosity," striking a particularly dissonant note relative to my conception of mission and vocation. In fact, the effect is jarring. The exhortation rings of a pre-Vatican II sense of the laity, one that relegates us to the role of humble docility before our theological betters. This feudal relationship is an ecclesial form whose time has passed, never to return. The Church of the Diocese of Santa Rosa has survived intact because of the laity and the commitment of the laity to institutions such as our parishes, schools, and charities. In large part, the teachers and school communities bore the heaviest burden over the last 15 years as we labored to restore confidence in our faith. Our classrooms were the frontline as we teachers sought to address the questions and challenges of our young students as their faith and innocence were repeatedly rocked by sexual and financial scandal perpetrated by our senior clergy. Even faithful priests confessed that, during this period of time, they became ashamed to wear their collars in public. Yet in the midst of this trial of public humiliation, our educators held fast to their vocations and continued to daily build up the body of the local Church through prayer, sacrifice, service, and teaching.

### 4. The New Evangelism

The Church of the Diocese of Santa Rosa is in desperate need of re-evangelization. Yet, how ought this to proceed? In my role as a teacher, I am daily engaged in the task of awakening and guiding the minds of the young adults entrusted to me by their families. It is my job to find the avenues by which I can speak to them and have my words received. Judgment does not work: it incites rebellion, divides the community, and drives people away. Jesus knew this and thus, he confronted the Pharisees for their rigid insistence on the law and ritual purity. He condemned the Pharisees for hypocrisy but refused to condemn the adulterous woman. Why? The Pharisees represented the tradition of faith, yet they drove the souls in their charge away from God by judging them, causing the people to despair and to resign themselves to an existence of futility.

Considering the clerical history of this diocese and the revelations of clerical abuse throughout the Church, a spirit of judgment will not successfully re-evangelize the Church of Santa Rosa. A more successful evangelical approach is being practiced by Pope Francis. The Holy Father has been winning the attention and affection of the world by refusing to judge others, modeling the faith, and manifesting the heart and love of God through humility, sacrifice, and service. The strategy of clerical leadership in the Church at this time must be to regain spiritual authority and public credibility by sincerely living for the sake of the greater community. Insistence on ritual purity while judging the laity for their moral failings will not yield the spiritual fruit desired.

Which brings me to the issue of the (happily postponed) contract addendum intended for faculty. To present us with a public statement of faith, one characterized not by breadth or depth or compassion but by a highly charged and politically-driven selectivity, is offensive. The assumption underlying the addendum seems to be that the faith of the laity in our diocese is suspect or has been measured and found wanting. In spite of the remarkable resilience of the laity in this era of clerical abuse, are we the ones now to be the objects of suspicion and inquisition, subjected to a standard notable for its starkness? The particular issues selected requiring public affirmation are matters of conscience that are not susceptible to a facile rendering in black and white. They are matters for pastoral counseling and even the confessional. A true pastoral concern for the lay faculty teaching in our schools would have unfolded through service and sacrifice rooted in a loving concern, not a browbeating catechesis that Bishop Daly, in a moment of honesty, described as a "culling" of the diocesan teachers.

### 5. The Diocesan Religion Departments

In a related matter, the religion departments in the diocesan schools are in chaos. Historically, a major reason that parents send their children to our Catholic schools has been the religious instruction that awakens them to the reality of God and their faith community, inviting them to an active participation in the life of the Church. Now, however, the administration of these departments has been removed from the control of the schools themselves and placed in the hands of the Chancery. Subsequently, a number of

teachers unable to effectively communicate with the students have been placed in the classrooms. Some of these teachers are neither academically nor temperamentally qualified to work in a school setting. In certain cases, this has led to a collapse of the class, as one unqualified instructor is replaced by another, in a dark imitation of musical chairs. Experienced educators understand that teaching is relational and students respond to the temperament, heart, and character of the adult standing in front of them, day after day. To bludgeon students with catechesis, without first establishing a relationship of trust with a class, creates alienation not belief. The impression by families that the religious curriculum is in a state of chaos, has gradually widened and affected their estimation of the entire diocesan academic enterprise. As a result, parents have withdrawn their children from our schools and our overall enrollment has dropped. Clearly, the current demoralization of our school communities, subsequent to the recent diocesan changes in the staffing and curriculum of our religion departments, does not evidence the work or fruits of the Holy Spirit.

## 6. Conclusion

Our ideas have real world consequences. Pope Francis sees the Church as "a field hospital after a battle." Our task is to "heal." Thus, in pursuing his mission, Francis has spoken to atheists, washed the feet of women, given alms to the poor, and reassured gay men and women of God's love and their dignity. A theology which mischaracterizes the God of love as a God of primitive and cruel justice will shape the pastoral approach and result in a divisive spirit of condemnation and judgment. It will drive people away. We are all broken children of God, striving towards the Kingdom of Heaven. God's Kingdom and our healing, however, will not be found in the perfection of law but in the perfection of love. God, our Parent, longs to draw each human person into the world of His heart where we can freely give and receive His love. If we are to successfully evangelize this diocese, the image of God which we must hold before the community is that of the loving Parent, gathering all of His children back home. This image will resonate with the deepest longings of men and women and draw them into unity, love, and peace. It will attract people because it is true. As the sun radiates God's warmth and light, we should radiate God's love, giving life and hope wherever we go.

I very much look forward to future dialogue.

Sincerely,

J. Scharfen, Esq.

cc: Teejay Lowe, Chair, Board of Directors

Laura Held, President, Cardinal Newman High School

Graham Rutherford, Principal, Cardinal Newman High School