

Protagonist Corner

Lessons From The Ministry

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I spent most of the summer of 1990 at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research in Jerusalem. That lovely facility, located on ten acres of land in the southern part of Jerusalem, was built by the Vatican after the Second Vatican Council to provide a place for interfaith dialogues in the Holy Land. Located high on a hill overlooking Bethlehem, the institute provides a lovely ambiance for visiting scholars. I participated in the summer program which included field trips to many sites of historic interest and many lectures about the current situation in Israel. It was a stimulating and growthful experience; it was my first trip to the Holy Land.

While I was at the Institute I celebrated the thirty-third anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry. The fact that I was in Jerusalem and that I was surrounded by Christians from England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, and diverse parts of the United States made me think a lot about my pilgrimage in the ministry and how I have been stretched into areas of unexpected growth. In spite of the fact that all of my professional life has been in higher education, I have lived most closely on those frontiers where Christian faith and higher education meet, and my identity as a minister has always been important to me. As I thought about the lessons I have learned in the ministry, three words crystallize in my mind: *unity*, *charity*, and *The Other*. In this brief article I want to clarify what each of those words has meant to me, with the hope that these reflections might evoke similar reflections in the minds of readers.

I

Unity refers to my growing sense of the unity of the Church. I was born into the old German Reformed Church in the United States. That church evolved into the United Church of Christ, and it was in that denomination, in my home church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that I was ordained on July 14, 1957. I did my basic theological study at the Yale Divinity School prior to the Second Vatican Council. That Council, and the warm, pastoral personality of Pope John XXIII, made a great impact on me, and gave me the motivation to learn more about the Roman Catholic tradition. That maturation was enhanced by my teaching position in the Religion department at Florida State University, which demanded that every scholar know more than his or her own tradition. A year in Europe in 1969-70 gave me an opportunity to visit four prominent Catholic universities and various houses of study. I met gracious people and received warm hospitality wherever I went. I was also introduced to some good Catholic humor. When I arrived at the American College at Louvain, Belgium

late on a Tuesday afternoon, I asked about having an informal discussion with the faculty after dinner. I was told that Tuesday evenings were set aside for spiritual meditation, so I just went to my room to read. About 9:00 p.m. a priest knocked on my door and asked if I would like to join the meditation group. When we got to the room, it turned out to be a weekly poker game, reinforced by some Belgian beer. We had a lively discussion in that smoke-filled room, I can assure you!

On another occasion in February of 1970, my wife and I made a trip from Cambridge, England to the Catholic seminary at Ushaw, just outside of Durham. It was a cold, snowy day, and my wife was six months pregnant with our first child. She was not feeling well and said she would remain outside in the car while I toured the seminary. My host, the Director of Studies at the seminary, would not hear of that, so he got her from the car and took her to his rooms, and insisted that she lie down in his bed. As we left his rooms he cautioned her: "Just one thing, Mrs. Carey. If anyone knocks on my door, don't answer it. It might create a bit of a scandal!"

But in and through my travels, I came to feel the oneness of the Spirit that binds the Church together. I came to see that we are bound together by much more than divides us. I have often said about college teaching that the great task is to help students overcome their ethnocentrism: that mentality that says my hometown, my region, my race, my religion, and my values are best. Education should be a process of growth into new awareness of other peoples, cultures, regions, faiths, and time periods. If that is true of education, it is likewise true of our theological development. We need to come to know other streams of the Church, other ways of worship, other forms of spirituality than our own. So I have come to feel in my own pilgrimage that as Christians we need to embrace each other, learn from each other, work together as we can, and experience the Spirit of God. No great human problem comes to us with a denominational label. Ecumenism is not a problem to be studied but a style of life to be lived. So unity has been one of my visions, and I hope it can also become a vision for readers of this article.

II

Charity is my second word. By that I mean the importance of recognizing the integrity of other traditions and their modes of worship. Most of us in the practice of ministry become deeply involved with the nuances of worship in our own traditions. I believe it is good for our souls to experience worship through the different patterns of other denominations. It keeps us from becoming too narrow and parochial in our sense of what the Christian tradition is.

As a graduate student studying the history of Christian doctrine, I recall coming across an insight by Paul Tillich that there is truth in every so-called heresy; and that to be a serious student of doctrine one needs to understand what major truths the outvoted parties were pointing to. Likewise I have learned that there is truth and power in various forms of worship. I have shared in silence with Quakers, raised my hands in prayer with Pentecostals, felt the presence of God in the Catholic eucharist, felt great emotional power

as I sang hymns with Methodists and Baptists, and been moved by the familiar words of liturgy with Anglicans and Lutherans.

Charity . . . the ability to take other traditions at their best. For the most part, we are inclined to take our own tradition at its best and we describe others at their worst. That is true when we speak inside the Christian family about other denominations, and outside the Christian family when we speak of other faiths. Charity implies the importance of learning before we make value judgments. It cautions us about stereotypes and caricatures. It helps us to see that there are saints in all of our traditions and in all of the world's great faiths. But how hard this is to come by! Robert McAfee Brown once commented on the militant Protestant hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers." One stanza of that hymn reads: "We are not divided; all one body, we; one in faith and one in hope, and one in charity." Brown noted that we would be more honest if we sang: "We are all divided; not one body, we; one lacks faith, the other hope, and *all* lack charity."

So the second growing awareness of my ministerial pilgrimage has been: Let Christians be respectful of each other, and of those who in the name of God differ from us. Paul admonished us, after all, to be kind to one another.

III

The Other. By this term I am referring to my growing awareness in the past twenty years that there have been whole groups of people who have been pained and marginalized by the traditional ways the Christian story has been told: women; blacks; poor people; refugees; most indigenous people who have been exploited and robbed in the process of being "converted" to Christianity; and all those who for whatever reason have lived on the fringes of mainstream white culture. I was older than I should have been before I sensed the validity of different streams of liberation theology. It has been a painful but liberating struggle for me to face and try to transcend the masculine ideology that has shaped so much of our Christian language and worship. I should say with Paul, "Not that I have achieved this, brethren. . . ." I am still working on these fronts. But raising five daughters has raised my consciousness about women's issues. Seeing American blacks, Central American base communities, American Indian Reservations, and Palestinian Arabs has raised my consciousness about the dispossessed.

There is one way of looking at the Christian tradition which says the great theological question of the first 1900 years was, "Who is God?" The great theological question of most of the twentieth century was, "Who are We? What does it mean to be a person?" The great question of the last twenty years has been, "Who is the neighbor?" So ready or not, we have to prepare for a third millennium in which we confront all those others: not just those in the Christian family, but Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other communities of faith. Hans Küng has called this the great "paradigm shift" in Christian theology. It invites us to think with new categories, models, and openness. It invites us to repentance, and to new ways of being. I am convinced that pluralism will be the great theological reality of the third millennium, and that it will set a new

theological agenda.

IV

I have commented on three facets of my growth in thirty-three years in the ministry. Each reader will have his or her own list, because we all learn from our experiences and from the unique aspects of our own pilgrimages. I have learned other things, too, but they are too complex to be woven into this brief article. I will say, however, that I have also learned how quickly time flies; how modest are our achievements, and that others can be means of grace to us without knowing it themselves.

The ministry is a high calling, and there is some truth in the old adage that each person learns through his or her own experiences about its special joys. There is value in remembering our ordination anniversaries and in periodically reflecting on what the years have meant to us. There is a time, also, to rededicate ourselves to that ministry of reconciliation that Paul talked about. Listen again to his words:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us (II Cor. 5:18-20, RSV).

May it be so.