

Protagonist Corner

Academy and Parish

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“What’s it like to be back in a congregation instead of teaching?” “Haven’t you had to make a lot of adjustments?” “How does it feel to be back in the real world of serving in a parish?” These questions, and others like them, come my way frequently since I changed from teaching in a seminary to resume serving as pastor in a Presbyterian congregation, this time in a small town in east Tennessee. The questions are sometimes asked with overtones of incredulity and astonishment.

I’m astounded at the astonishment. I hear there strains of the melancholy self-image some practicing pastors cultivate. I also hear naive echoes of idolized deference for seminary professors they have known. And perhaps some hazy nostalgia for bygone seminary days.

The change for me really was a resumption. Prior to entering the teaching profession I had served two congregations—one was a small town church not unlike the one with which I now work, the other a medium-sized congregation in an industrial area. During the sixteen years I taught New Testament on theological faculties I served as interim pastor or supplied for extended intervals eight congregations of varied size, locale and temperament. So I had some idea in advance of what to expect.

As far as I know my mind I believe that I made the change from academy to parish not to escape the rigorous demands of the academy nor to distance myself from an unpleasant vocational or personal context. It was less a choice against the academy than it was a choice for the parish. When I first moved from parish ministry to teaching that shift was the right one for me at that time. Just so, the reversal sixteen years later was right for whom I had become during that interval.

So I can report that it’s different here in the parish. It isn’t better, or worse—it’s just different. I want to report on some of those differences.

First of all, the junk mail is different. The bargains, “good deals” and unsolicited opportunities sent to snare me as a professor were both more specialized and more exotic (facsimile reproductions of First Century near-Eastern lamps, reduced prices for *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, etc.). The junk mail cascading from the parish mailbox is more general, voluminous and bizarre. I am assaulted daily by the cheap hucksterism which vends trashy wares to meet all needs, solve all problems, supply all lacks. Its persistent flow stimulates within me depressing reflections that somebody must be buying this stuff and foisting it off onto unsuspecting folks.

A not unrelated observation has been the rediscovery of my proclivity for pastoral piddling. When, like the prodigal savoring his swine husks, I had for the umpteenth time carefully sorted, opened, and examined everything that

came through the mail, I said to myself in the words of the immortal Jason Robards, "This is madness." Now, after swiftly glancing at return address and paid postage, I shuffle decks of unopened stuff into the round file with malicious, liberated glee. I probably have thrown away something with substance and integrity that I could use, but I'm not going to paw through the dross looking for it.

On a more positive note I have been delighted to experience the recovery of a penchant for pondering. The academy doesn't permit much time for that. Servicing the varied programs which the academy mounts always seems to strain the limits of available instructional and administrative energy. Then there are the ordinary secondary tasks which accompany membership on a seminary faculty and community, and pressures to service the wider constituency whenever possible. Through it all the drive to keep current in one's field of specialization while keeping at least moderately informed of issues and advances in related disciplines tends to dictate how one's spare time is spent. Of course this pondering business can slide deviously over into the concern of the previous paragraph (on pastoral piddling) if one is not careful. But when shepherded with a little self-control it has been for me a rich and satisfying salvage.

This brings me to the matter of books. Quantitatively I read at least as much in the parish as I did in the academy. It's the focus that is different. My range of interest is much broader, and is regularly expanded by books which church members want to discuss with me. But there's a swap-off for that breadth. I've given up trying to keep up in my specialization. Actually I didn't keep up in the seminary either. There's just too much being published, though we didn't talk about that much in the academy. Still, I did come closer then. I miss the stimulation of the academy discourse—the rigorous, attentive, occasional exchanges with colleagues, and the intensity of inquiry and challenge which some students bring to the process of pastoral formation. I miss not a bit the dreary slogging through the bogs of the adversarial relationship which our system of education has schooled most students to expect as normative. I find in the parish an intensity equal to that in the academy, though the ability to articulate varies more widely. In parish exchanges what is at stake is clearer and less convoluted. I possess no intimidating institutional power to get in the way. What they expect from me is not tainted by the drive to succeed at all costs in an externally imposed program.

Related to this consideration is the fact that in the academy the motive for personal investment and quality effort frequently is moderated by the pressure to make the grade, and thereby to secure the credentials necessary for initiation into ecclesiastical structures in the desired role. The tension between credentials, goals and the process of formation for the exercise of pastoral ministry is one of the toughest internal struggles ubiquitous to the church's academy. In the parish even when credentials are a live concern, the primary drive for exchanges is that of curiosity, interest and personal growth.

A primary concern in the academy is with methodology. A large part of its mission is to school its students in the scope, skills, techniques and resources of the theological disciplines. Occasional digressions to focus on the substance of

the matter at hand at the service of the students' own faith pilgrimages occur. These digressions have to be husbanded carefully or they become too costly both in time and emphasis. Educationally such digressions serve mainly as experiential illustrations that the methodology of the discipline has not yet been mastered. In the parish primary interest is on the substance as it informs today's faith claims. Parishioners do respond with interest to technical, methodological issues. (The protest that most of what is learned in the seminary won't even be granted a hearing by lay people just is not so. If that which is of interest to the academy has no currency in the parish, it is not an indictment of the irrelevance of the academy but of the lack of vigorous didactic presence in parish leadership). Nevertheless they rightly insist that the bottom line provides some insight or resolution which enriches their faith experience.

In all this I do not intend to give the impression that academy and parish are mutually exclusive arenas. When the academy is at its best it is a Christian community committed to ministerial formation, with the parish concerns that "Christian community" implies. In like manner the academy and academy concerns have their necessary place "in the trenches." I find fine opportunities for stimulating, informed discussion of issues current in the church's life with members of the congregation.

One feature of the parish which impresses me more acutely than ever is the richness of cumulative worship experiences and the strength of congregational continuity. The academy is deprived of that. Its population for the most part is temporary, transient, and usually restricted to a limited slice of the whole pie of human experience. So I am rediscovering the tremendous power of ritual, tradition, symbol, drama, "our story" and sense of mystery. I had learned that once in the academy when I taught for eight years on a Roman Catholic graduate theological faculty, the School of Divinity of St. Louis University. The liturgy of the Mass and the tradition stories of the religious orders provided a continuity and unity which transcended the temporary sojournings of individual students. A similar potential is present in the memory and dramatic instinct of the parish to be celebrated, developed and used.

This is being written for a journal feature called "Protagonist Corner." My dictionary finds the term "protagonist" ambiguous. It can mean "the leading character in a play" or "a spokesman who champions a cause." Though the ham in me may lean toward the former, (a lure in both academy and parish), I write this intending the latter. Without disparaging the academy and the indispensable role it plays in the life of the church, I am a categorical advocate for the practice of ministry in the parish. Frankly I think that all who are involved in the church's academy are advocates for parish ministry, or ought to be. Any institution that is serious about formational training for the practice of parish ministry should be as aggressive in its sabbatical policies about encouraging periodic immersion into parish practice as it is about the need for scholarly investigation and writing. Neither should be ignored. That would give new meaning to the "publish or parish" slogan.

Oh, yes. One final difference: my wife and I don't party late on Saturday evenings—at least not very much.