

Reflection Paper: "Ministry in Context: A Methodological Introduction"

APPLYING THE LIMEX CONTEXTS OF MINISTRY REFLECTION PROCESS TO

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY

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At the outset of this course, my concept of ministry was somewhat indistinct and ill-defined. I believe this was partly because I had not considered the idea of ministry something to be thought about and learned as much as to be done. I initially thought of ministry as any work having to do with the Church, partly stemming from my experience of leaving the Catholic Church I was raised in at 20 years old.¹ In my three-and-one-half years as a Protestant, we used the word ministry to refer to God's work in the Church. I did have thoughts when starting the course that what I did for work could be considered ministry. This conflict within myself concerning the definition of ministry caused me to struggle internally, and I felt challenged to examine what ministry is. In the beginning of the book *Ministry* and in the *Syllabus*, the authors challenged me to pen my definition of the concept of ministry (McBrien 7, O'Gorman 12). I defined ministry as, "Doing anything from the love of God and the desire to serve Him," and what it was not, "Doing anything from any other motive." McBrien's categorization of ministry into four areas provided a useful paradigm with which to examine the idea of ministry (12-13).² With my background, I associated Christian-specific activities almost exclusively with the definition of ministry. My work would be an example of the general/universal category. The general/specific category can be found in the work of doctors, psychiatrists and similar professions. The difference between the previous one and Christian/universal would be a doctor who donates his services for free to aid those who cannot pay or those who have no access to health care. The last area is dependant upon the reasons of the one doing the service. The four areas McBrien elaborated on have given shape and form to my initially narrow and nebulous view of ministry. I will explore the institutional, cultural, personal and traditional contexts of ministry as this relates to my own story and

my activity in the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO), and its implications for my own practice of ministry.³

During a business course I took several years ago, the teacher asked us to name the largest bureaucracy in the world.⁴ I was thinking of governments such as the pre-breakup Soviet Union or the United States. When he answered his own question with the Roman Catholic Church, I was at first dumbfounded. Only later upon reflection did I realize the truth of the statement. It is a true statement that there can be no bureaucracy without institution. I always lived my life in this context, like the branches of a tree in which a bird builds its nest. Like the bird, I never gave much thought to those branches or the impact they had upon my life, simply living in it, thinking more in terms of activity and people than organizational structure. As Americans, my generation has a built-in mistrust of institutions with scandals such as Nixon's Watergate and Clinton's Whitewater, among many other unsavory events. Church history also reflects scandalous events of its own such as the censuring of Galileo, among many other incidents. These acts do not inspire faith in institutions. I do not tend to think of the Church and its work in institutional terms. As a Protestant, I learned to think of the people in the Church and their salvation, turning a blind-eye to the benefits of institution and was anti-institutional, having an inherent prejudice against formal, organized structure.⁵ Because of my experiences as an American and a Protestant, I learned to be self-reliant and was skeptical, at best, about institutions, with the idea of community far from my mind. I had to protect my all-sacred autonomy, which I perceived was threatened by these establishments.

The Sancta Chiara Secular Franciscan Order (SFO) community was formed in mid-1996, with its members coming from an area covering about 450 square miles, meeting at St. Joseph Franciscan Mission, in the mountains of Mescalero, New Mexico (Gerber 1-2). The SFO institution is organized as reads in the rule:

The Secular Franciscan Order is divided into fraternities of various levels – local, regional, national, and international (Rule 31). Each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister who are elected by the professed according to the constitutions (Rule 32).

The Sancta Chiara Fraternity, being a new establishment, is organizationally under a fraternity in El Paso, Texas and part of the Southwest Region. This region is part of the United States SFO, aligned under the international order in Rome, the president of which is an Italian lawyer. This international order comes under the guidance of the Roman Catholic Church, its rule of life approved by the Pope. Our ministries cover eight basic areas. We work in the Peace and Justice, Family, Ecology, Work, and Formation commissions, put out a monthly calendar, pray for and help one another, and work to assist the cash-strapped Mission where we meet (Gerber 2). Through this structure, we work to rebuild society. These ministries are all done as a community, so that community becomes integral to any ministry in which we are involved. I do not mean by this that we can only be involved in ministries for which we all can be present. Community is always in our hearts, minds and desire as we work, representing the ones who cannot be present.

The practice of these ministries has always been a real struggle for me in this context. When I started writing this paper, I wanted to relegate this area to the last and least important part, spending as little time as I could on it. Simply knowing I would be required to assess this context of ministry caused me consternation and concern. I have

learned that institution really functions like a hurdle for me to overcome in order to do ministry in any setting. My aversion to institutions has caused me problems within myself as I serve in the military and has caused me to become much less effective as I have failed to address this issue. It has definitely affected my discernment relating to my continuing in the fraternity in a negative way. Because of this difficulty, I have been effectively neutralized from being able to discern, which caused me to dismiss it automatically as not for me. With this knowledge, I feel that true discernment was not possible before, but that I can start that process of figuring out God's call concerning this group. This has led to a greater awareness that I need to pay particular attention to this area, especially because of my desire to become a priest after I retire from the military.

I am an Irish-German Catholic, born in 1963 America and raised in New York. I went to Catholic school 11 of the first 12 years of my formal education. I joined the United States Air Force and have been serving in this way for the past 17 years. I left my Church and became a virulently anti-Catholic, fundamentalist Protestant. After I returned to the Church of my youth, I received a bachelor's degree in business administration from a private Baptist college.⁶ In this short synopsis of my personal context, I lived my entire life in relationship to others -- in community. Some of the main communities during this time were my family, Catholic Church, schoolmates, Air Force family, various Protestant circles, and Wayland University family. My own personal story has shaped and, I imagine, will always shape my view of who I am and what I do. Now I need to explore this story a bit more since it was so life-changing and determines who I am today and, naturally, how I approach ministry. My life-philosophy is based upon my experiences and cannot be divorced from it, as far as I can tell.

My raising as a Roman Catholic provided me a good, solid Catholic intellectual education in everything but my Catholic faith. I was taught a humble and meek faith of the heart, not a doctrinal faith addressing how to answer questions about my faith. I also learned quite well the principle of consistency that my actions and beliefs must correspond. I was challenged by some people to leave the Church I loved because she was, as they claimed, "The whore of the book of Revelation," and that the Pope was the antichrist incarnate. Since I could not defend my faith, I left my Mother whom I loved and in whom I was nurtured by my entire life. These years as a Protestant were both of great benefit and harm for me. The benefits were a focus on a relationship with God, a deep abiding love of sacred scripture and a desire for the salvation of others. I was also deeply hurt by the perception I gained from this experience that my beloved Church deceived me my entire life. Being young, I grew embittered from this hurt, not aware of what to do with the feelings I was experiencing. I learned how to judge others harshly and did so better than most. I became violently anti-Catholic. The bitterness grew into hatred and a hardened heart that was not capable of love, from a young boy of such a tender heart filled with the love of God. In short, I was an anti-Catholic bigot whose life had been racked with emotional, mental and spiritual pain, bitterness and confusion through this journey of faith.

I returned to the Catholic Church at 23 and started on my long road to recovery. The ensuing 12 years have been characterized by a reorientation to love my neighbor as myself. This did not happen overnight. My heart remained full of hurt and bitterness, which I simply transferred to Protestants. A Protestant to me was anyone who carried a Bible. God has been healing me, slowly removing my "stony heart" to replace it with a

"natural heart" (Ezekiel 36:2). From this experience, I have also learned of God's mercy for me, and by extension, for all people. My heart echoed Viens suffering of heart I heard as he struggled through his own life, trying to find his way (Introduction iv-vii and Chapter 1: 1-5). In the personal context, my part of our ministry as an SFO community is tempered by my experiences I have outlined. From all of these experiences, I have learned that people should be my focus because people are more important than ideas, philosophies, theologies or ideologies. I accept people as they are as best as I can, be they different or the same as me. The basis for my ministry has become to bring the Lord's mercy, compassion and forgiveness as I realize how much I have been shown and given. Saint Francis' gentle way of love and penance is very attractive for this reason.

The concepts of culture and ethnicity are very similar to me. By definition, culture is the way of life of a people and ethnicity relates to a people, or race, with common physical and cultural traits (Webster 209 and 309, respectively). These definitions show that culture is a part of ethnicity, which is from where my confusion stems. In differentiating between them, I see ethnicity as a physical heritage and, by extension, a group of homogeneous people who have physical traits in common. Culture, in contrast, is made up of areas such as lifestyle, religion, language and diet. This understanding of culture corresponds to the insights of A Methodological Introduction (Winters 9-10). While ethnic groups, when homogeneous, can be a culture, my reflections on my own raising show clearly that I did not grow up in this type of environment. I have lived in multiethnic and multicultural environments most of my life, living the past 17 years all over the world in the Air Force. Adding to this confusion, I have always adopted whatever I admired in any culture or ethnic group among which I lived.

The SFO and those we minister to are made up of a variety of different backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles, and depths of spiritual growth (Gerber 1). A list of our members reflects Anglo-Saxon, various European, Mescalero Apache, Hispanic and Mexican descents. Some are wealthier than others are. Some are beginners in practicing their Catholic faith, while others are extremely knowledgeable and practiced. An example of a difficulty we faced was between the communication styles of the outspoken Anglos and the more quiet Native Americans (Gerber 1). This incident presented the possibility of the group splitting and the ministry to one another and others being dissolved. Heeding the advice of our rule of life and our mother fraternity in El Paso, we resolved this through prayerful discussions and a period of adjustment. Our ministry extends to a diversity of peoples, having the effect of uniting differing peoples and groups. In reflecting on the cultural aspect of our ministry, I see we have faced some bumpy roads because of the differences we have, yet living according to the SFO rule has given us the guidance and strength to not only survive, but also flourish.

My definition of tradition would be the living, corporate experience that is always being rethought, reapplied and reappropriated for today's situation in life. It was always a tradition in my family to let the birthday-person pick the menu for dinner and dessert on that person's special day. This familial tradition was not extant until we kids were old enough for Mom to think up this great idea. It just so happened that we all loved her lasagna and a certain ice cream cake, which we had every birthday I can remember. Looking back on this tradition, it can appear static, as if it were fixed in stone, yet it developed over the years into an repeatable activity when certain foods are eaten in celebration of someone's birthday. I also grew up with traditions in the Church such as

going to Mass, participating in the sacraments, extending the sign of peace. These traditions are ancient, spanning the millennia, and yet as new as a baby because they are not only the experience of those who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith, but lived experiences of all of us who participate in them. Inasmuch as this is true, they are fixed in one sense, yet always new because of the individual and corporate experience of these activities, every time being potentially for the very first time.

I grew up and have always lived with traditions in both my life and Church, even when I was an anti-Catholic Protestant arguing against tradition because Christ condemned the Pharisees who followed "human traditions" (Mk 7:8).⁷ I now consider humorous how we, as anti-traditionalist Protestants, would deny that tradition had any part in our faith experience, yet we would live out of our own traditions as I defined the word above. We would pride ourselves that we were not enslaved to those 'traditions,' but were so spontaneous in what we did, spontaneity being the watermark for being truly open to the Spirit. Tradition for us, was a dead letter, a thing that was decided long ago and was static, just something you did without heart or life. In contrast, Saint Francis expected any following in his way to listen and adhere to the teachings of the Church, sourced in either scripture or tradition, the Church being the authority to make such determinations. He lived out tradition as I defined it above in the context of that Church authority, as do we today.

Franciscan traditions require certain things of those who would follow Saint Francis of Assisi. We are required by the rule to join in liturgical prayer in reciting one of the following: Morning and Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, a shortened form of this, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Office of the Passion, the Office

of the twelve Our Fathers or some other form of liturgical prayer approved by the spiritual assistant (Ritual 103).⁸ We are called by our spiritual father to live a life of penance and good works, embracing each other in the love of Christ and in all we do to rebuild the Church. This is a good summation of the ministry of Secular Franciscans, in short. We do this all the many activities we are involved in and the many special projects we do, such as the time we worked at the St. Francis Mission Bazaar to help raise money for this poor mission-church. We rebuilt society by working with the kids in the Special Olympics, bringing the light of Christ to them by our activity, motivated by the love we had in our hearts. The more I see the benefits to those we help, the more I see that true ministry is not limited to a church building or even in the context of ‘church work.’ I can see how whatever I do in life can be considered a ministry.

Notes

¹ I left the Church I could not defend when I was presented with the Protestant thesis that the Roman Catholic Church was the ‘whore’ of Revelation and the Pope the antichrist.

² General/universal ministry is any service rendered to a group or individual who need the service. General/specific is any service given by people in the helping professions and the other service occupations and rooted in a particular competence. Christian/universal is any general service rendered to others in Christ and because of Christ. Christian/specific is the same as Christian/universal in addition to being in the name of the Church to help fulfill its mission.

³ I joined this fraternity as an inquirer in June 1997 and later determined this was not the way I believed God was calling me to do what He created me to do.

⁴ I was in an undergraduate degree program with Wayland Baptist University. I do not recall which class this reference to bureaucracy came in. My instructor was Mr. David Boatman, with whom I had most of my business courses.

⁵ This prejudice seems to stem from the Protestant dogma of Sola Scriptura, Latin for Scripture Alone. It means that scripture alone is the basis for faith, exclusive of any other source (as the basis of faith) and allows for only the self to be the interpretive authority. This is fortified by the use of John 16:13a, When he comes, however, being the Spirit of truth he will guide you to all truth (All scripture quotes are from the New American Bible except where noted), which is interpreted to mean the individual is granted this interpretive charism. This can be shown to be false in many ways, one of which is the fact that there are, on average, five new churches established every week (Hahn). If this were the correct interpretation, how is Jesus’ prayer in John’s Gospel explained (Jn 17:11)? It cannot because the context of the entire scripture witness clearly shows the Church is a visible, not invisible, entity.

⁶ See Note 4.

⁷ This word appears 13 times in scripture as seen in Strong’s (King James Version): Mt 15:1ff [3 times]; Mk 7:1ff [5]; Col 2:8 [1]; 1Pt 1:18 [1]; Gal 1:14 [1]; 2 Th 3:6 [1]; and 2 Th 2:15 [1] (1072). The only

references that refer to a positive adherence of tradition are the last three. As a Protestant, two of my extra biblical (and unbiblical) traditions were sola scriptura and sola fide.

⁸ The Franciscan Chaplet is a prayer wherein a person says twelve rounds of one Hour Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be. The prayer is flexible in form, and many people add many other prayers or intentions to the twelve rounds. Some say it in its bare bones simplicity.

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