Reflection Paper 1: Probing the Explicit, Implicit and Null Curriculum in my Institution

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In this paper, I will probe the explicit, implicit, and null curricular expectations, instructions, and possibilities I have identified and experienced within the institutional context of my religious education practice.

My institutional context is the Catholic Church in macro and Immaculate Conception Church in micro, in Alamogordo, New Mexico, a town of about 35,000 people in the developing Diocese of Las Cruces. When one looks at the structure of the main church building and the attached offices and hall, one finds a beautiful adobe-style church with peach colored walls and a very ornate looking roof with orange colored tiles. On the corner of 8th Street and Delaware Avenue, the sanctuary glass double-doors face Delaware with an entrance on 8th Street on the left as you are facing the church from Delaware. To the right there is a small courtyard, most of which is grass with a concrete path which is met by a beautiful white statue of the Blessed Mother with her arms outstretched, the Church's namesake, on a large octagonal base with some flowers and plants in the dirt of the base. If one goes to the left of the statue, they will travel under the overhang of the building which is made up of rounded arches, and will find a glass door to the office immediately in front, with two more entrances to the sanctuary, one directly ahead but to the left of and set back from the office door and another at a 90-degree angle to the left of this one. If one travels to the right of the statue, one finds another entrance to the offices on the left under the overhang and, straight ahead past this, one finds a door to the parish hall. The parish hall can also be entered through a set of double glass doors facing Delaware Avenue. When one enters the parish hall, one finds a large open room, big enough to accommodate a large crowd such as when Sr. Lucy came from the diocesan center in Las Cruces, 70 miles West of our town, to teach a class for

lectors and communion ministers on changes that were being made to practices in the churches in the United States. There is also a large kitchen through a door from this larger room where we prepare meals as a parish when, for example, we have breakfast after honoring Mary on one of her feast days. A narrow hallway going towards the back of the church building reveals some smaller, walled-in classrooms to the left with bathrooms to the right of the hallway. This hall and classrooms are used for multiple purposes every day, one of which is religious education. The Church also owns a small building on the street to the West of Delaware, on New York Avenue, between a small bank and the priests' residence that has one main room, a storage room and a small kitchen that is also used for religious education. Each of the spaces we have to hold religious education classes including the Church are cooled by swamp coolers. Because we live in an arid, desert environment the swamp cooler works by blowing air from a holding tank filled with water. It is also known as an evaporative cooler, since the water evaporates and the blower sends that evaporating air into the room. I have taught Rite of Christian Initiation of Adult, Bible Study, and other classes in all of these rooms at one time or another over the years. These are my two main modes of religious education at present, but I have also taught at a diocesan server retreat and a variety of other teaching.

The people who make up this parish are a mix of people; about half are American from a variety of European backgrounds, about half predominantly New Mexican and Mexican Hispanic backgrounds, some Mescalero Apache with some German Air Force members and their families. The people of the parish are very warm, welcoming, and inclusive. Many of the people work on the Air Force Base about 6 miles away from town and most people have some association to the Base through work, family and friends.

Many of the people are involved in several programs we have such as the Parish School

of Religion (PSR) for the children, adult Bible Study, an active Cursillo group, RCIA

which has had as many as 40 and as few as 12, a Spanish prayer group, Hora Apostolica

with Benediction weekly and other activities. We have a group of people who are active

in each ministry in the Church, including the liturgical ministries, and these groups

remain stable. The Mass schedule is Saturday at six o'clock at night, Sunday morning at

eight o'clock (bilingual), and at ten-thirty. Our parish is large for a small New Mexican

town, with quite a good number of families. Since we are not a rich parish, we usually

take in about \$3000 a week in the collections, August 24th showing \$3249 (Immaculate

2). There are two Franciscan friars caring for three parishes in Alamogordo, La Luz and

Cloudcroft and a mission covering an area of about 20 miles. Additionally, since the old

Jesuit in the other parish in town passed to his heavenly reward, our priest receives calls

from St. Jude's parishioners for anointing of the sick and other sacramental needs. The

Franciscans are from Cincinnati and ensure we always have a priest to confer the

sacraments honoring their agreement with the Diocese. We also have a friar, Brother

Bill, who assists in the administrative duties of the parish so that the pastor, who is nearly

70, can attend to the parishioners' sacramental needs. We also have an older deacon I

have not seen in years, but I assume he is still active because his name is listed in the

bulletin (Immaculate 1). We have a pamphlet available for Sunday liturgy that has the

entire Mass in a split-page format with English and Spanish on half of each page and the

front of the bulletin has a reflection in both languages.

The administration of the Parish is broken up and shared by many people, both

paid employees and volunteers. We have a secretary to run the parish office. The

following committees and ministries are chaired or run by lay people: Lectors, Communion Ministers, Servers, Annulments, Ushers, RCIA, Bible Study, PSR, Cursillo, Prayer Group, and Stations of the Cross. Ultimately, our Pastor is responsible for the Parish, but he relies on the parish populace not only to assist but also to do much of the work and make decisions as necessary. For example, the woman in charge of the RICA program collaborates with the pastor and makes many of the decisions pertaining to the program. When some people wanted to start a Bible Study and planned to use Church facilities, we approached the pastor who gave us the go ahead. We have a parish council who advise the Pastor on the pulse of the parish and make recommendations. The Pastor respects his parishioners and shares authority and responsibility with those in charge of the different ministries. We can do whatever we want as long as it does not conflict with the faith. It is a pleasant experience to deal with the authority in our local Church.

Religious education in the parish is generally organized by the person leading it. Usually it is a volunteer or a team of volunteers to make this part of the parish run. We have PSR, Adult Bible Study, RCIA and every once in a while an ex-priest, who studied in Louvain and received the dispensation to leave the active ministry, will give a class on a topic of interest which always draws a crowd. Most teachers usually create curriculum from their personal or Church resources that allow discussion rather than lecture where everyone has input from their own experience. I used Thomas Groome's praxis approach in an RCIA class on Baptism I gave earlier this year to experience what I was learning in Focus Course One (Groome Chapter 10). This method of going from what a student knows, expressing and discussing it, allowing it to interface with Church teaching, and integrating this into the person's life and understanding was extremely successful and

very well received. From my experience, most of our parish seems to be peopled by those who assume they do not know enough to speak out and so they seem reticent and only with a little prodding do they relate their own understandings and experiences to the rest of the class so we can all learn from one another. Those who have accepted this invitation to share their own experiences and understandings generally are much more open to continuing this practice and I believe the Park model, being congruent with Groome's praxis approach, to be the preferred method for the majority of the parish. Usually curriculum is something most people in the parish do not think about at all because they come to learn, not develop a curriculum. Neither parish nor diocese prescribe any particular curriculum, but it is apparent from the variety of training I have attended that are taught by diocesan staff that most seem to enjoy more of a dialogue format, giving me the impression that on a diocesan and local level, they would most likely favor a Park/Praxis approach to a Gym or Wilderness approach. Now that I have described my institutional context as completely as I can, I want to take three questions from the tape from week six and allow them to interact with elements of my descriptive overview after which I will draw out some insights, implications and strategies for a more intentional and effective practice of curriculum development.

The first question is: who or what am I excluding, avoiding, silencing? Well, obviously, since we are a Catholic Church, we do not have non-Catholic theology preached from the pulpit or taught in our religious education classes. This does not simply exclude Protestants, but also other religions such as Mormons, Moslems and Animists. This exclusion is rather natural, but does not create an atmosphere where the people of the parish being afraid to talk to people of other religions. We sing many songs

that were penned by the likes of Andre Crouch and other modern Christian song writers and there are several songs we sing that are sung in other Christian Churches and originated in those Protestant Churches. I have used movies such as *The Elephant Man* and *Ben Hur* in High School classes to teach a variety of lessons. I have also used *The Song of the Bird* by the Indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello, to reflect truth I saw in the stories that come from many different religions. In the RCIA class on Baptism, opening up to a discussion of previous and present understandings of the sacrament caused me to relate the Baptist understanding of it as we had a Baptist in the class who was having trouble expressing his understanding. In that class, there were many views that were not represented because there was no one from those traditions or understandings to share from their own experience and understanding. There simply is not time to cover every single thought on a subject, but rather the intention of the class is to deal with the people and their beliefs, practices and understandings. Most people here are very open to listening to others and want an inclusive environment where people can discuss subjects rather than thinking if a knowledgeable person is talking that one should *shut up and learn*, since learning does not only come from listening to one person, but a more complete learning comes from participation by all. The Spanish and English used attempt to include everyone, but any Germans who might not speak English, while very rare in my experience, would be an example of excluding them, albeit not intentionally. We make every attempt to make strangers welcome in the parish and the priest asks before the end of Mass if visitors will stand and tell us where they are from so we might welcome them, to which we applaud and go up to welcome them to our town and parish.

It is this attitude or state of mind that is prominent in our parish, extending to the religious education classes.

The next question: what is lost and gained using technology in religious education? Technology, meaning computers, networks, the internet, digital cameras, scanners, printers and all the other equipment that falls under this category simplify keeping in contact, disseminating information, gathering and organizing information for teaching a class, finding useful information to use in a Bible Study class, among other uses. While the equipment and internet connections cost money, using them save on printing costs, paper, mailings that are only thrown away, reducing waste and doing positive things to help better our environment. With the right software, a Church can do its own finances among a myriad of other things and with community volunteers, they can fix problems and learn how to do new things the easiest way at the lowest cost. What is lost if electronic media is used solely to accomplish ministry is personal contact. Collaboration on projects or ministries could theoretically be done without any personal contact at all until the night of the class or event. This flies in the face of the Christian message and how that has been traditionally lived out in the history of Christianity. How do you show love to the brother or sister you do not see? How do you express the warmth of a hug in e-mail? How do you know your people as a pastor or minister if you only see them at Mass and then maintain contact electronically? The sacraments essentially require a physical presence as they take ordinary things such as bread, wine, water, oil, cloth, candle, ring, touch (lying on of hands), etc., and use them in sacred rites that accomplish what they symbolize. This cannot be done through technology, but require an actual, physical presence. The balance is between the faith and the things

technology can do for one as we live. Our lives cannot be lived solely in computers simply because God created us to touch, see, smell, taste, and hear in the present, not when convenient through e-mail. Something is lost by losing physical presence that is a great strength of being human, the emotive expression of a hug or a kiss at the sign of peace, the comfort given at the tragedy of a death in the family, the joy at the signs of new life. This can be seen when one looks at a picture and compares it to actually being there. The picture can never replace the actual experience, from which we formulate our understandings and world-views and would never work in my institutional context.

Our final question: does religion develop curriculum to be self-propagating, ignoring or suppressing of information that could put religious belief in doubt? Naturally, a religion would never intentionally teach information that would discredit its own religious beliefs. This proposition, by its very nature, is absurd and self-defeating. Christianity is believed by its adherents to be a complete faith that can be shown true even under the most intense scrutiny as many great minds have discovered throughout history.[1] But there is a more sublime part of this question: is a Church responsible to teach information in such a way as to put doubts in the hearts and minds of the faithful or is it to strengthen their faith? The openness of the people of Southern New Mexico and Immaculate Conception Church, in particular, indicate a willingness to listen. Listening does not imply throwing away your own beliefs and replacing them with another set of beliefs and values. When I develop curriculum for an RCIA class, for example, I use all information available to me that bears on the subject. When I helped the one person in the Baptism class to express his former understanding as a Baptist, this was done in a context of helping him explore his understanding with the class as we prepared to learn

the Catholic teaching on the subject and incorporate that belief into this present understanding so that he might embrace the Catholic faith. For this reason, there were several omissions such as any other understandings of this sacrament that were not brought up because the purpose of the class is to help these people decide if they want to become Catholic. Synthesis of belief is an important part of the RCIA journey and each person must come to terms with it if they are really going to be wholeheartedly Catholic. Since I accept that the Catholic faith is revealed truth and that nothing can be true and conflict with the Catholic faith simultaneously, I do not fear to be open and honest in my classes. I find that discussing information that does not bear on the subject or introducing an opposing view while teaching on a subject that conflicts with the subject we are talking about is an absurd thing to do if it is only done to ensure every idea is included. The teacher who uses this approach must be able to annunciate the faith and answer objections well and convincingly. Yet, just because a teacher is not capable does not negate its truth. It is a great mistake otherwise to usurp religious education by forcing oneself to ensure all data is considered, even to the neglect of the subject or the aim of the education.

Now that I have examined questions in light of my institutional context, I want to point out some things I have learned about developing strong curricula. The first thing I believe to be important in developing effective, strong curricula is to recall the context in which the learning is taking place. This was highlighted by the discussion answering the first and last questions above and is the same basic idea as not taking a scriptural quotation out of context. I believe a proper contextual understanding is healthy and keeps one from asking the nonsensical questions when considered. Secondly, we need to

stick to the topic at hand and not stray into whatever the student desires to learn as if this is in some way beneficial to the subject at hand. It is not appropriate in my context of RCIA, particularly, to get into subjects that have no bearing on the subject of the class. Third, the teacher needs to be as well-versed as possible to be able to provide an adequate understanding of the topic at hand. Getting into information that is not necessarily related to the topic or that contradicts the topic can only successfully take place when the instructor can provide an explanation that answers the objections or provides a reasonable explanation of why the belief is as it is.

Works Cited

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[1] I have in mind the very widely known stories in Catholic circles of the many recent converts such as Scott and Kimberly Hahn, not to mention G.K Chesterton, others of his time and the many other stories that could be related of St. Augustine, etc.