

The Ecclesial Person of the Third Millennium

As the new millennium opens before us, an ecclesial person must be characterized by integrity and authenticity that rest on Transcendent Mystery.

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WE have entered the final decade of the twentieth century. Vatican II is a distance of twenty-five years in the past. We are midway into the fifty-year span that some who watch history suggest is necessary for a major event to impact the lives of people. What kind of person do we need for the Church of the twenty-first century? What will an ecclesial person of the third millennium look like? As we approach this new era we have need as never before for an authentic person who is indeed ecclesial. It is such a person who will be the key to a transformed image of a church that is in and for a struggling world.

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We will presume, first, that the world has need of such a person. The world, and more critically the United States, is suffering from a bankruptcy of credibility. Deception has a high profile. This breeds suspicion in people of political leadership, business management, and ecclesiastical authority. The new kind of person we are suggesting is needed both among the baptized and the ordained. The ecclesial person is a presence in the ecclesial community and a presence in the human community. The question becomes, "What kind of 'real presence' is needed to make a difference in *both* realms?" Because integrity or authenticity is such a critical need at a time darkened by deceit and duplicity, the ecclesial person we seek will need to be an authentic human being. Our second assumption, then, is that it will profit us to try to explain what authenticity might mean in our times.

Finally, the ecclesial person of the third millennium will need to be ecclesial in a way that transforms what it means to be 'churched'. Our age is media fed. Images are the stuff out of which ideas are formed. To neglect this starting place is to lose people before we have begun. We must begin then with a new image of presence. The image of a person profoundly present to the church and the world will in time give birth to critical reflection built on that experience.

THE CREDIBILITY GAP

Eastern European changes move with such swiftness that bewildered observers are left breathless. The Middle East has become a tinder box. Upheaval marks the birth of a new Africa. Closer to home, Americans are frustrated over their neighborhoods becoming infested with drug pushers, the media presenting biased half-truths along with politicians who simply can't be trusted. People seek credibility, whether it be in a politician, a priest, or a product, and they yearn for something or someone who will give them heart to continue to struggle to be decent human beings.

In the face of such change and challenge the human community will rise or fall on the *kind* of human beings that emerge to image that authentic struggle. Images abound of liars and cheats, pushers and pimps, power potentates, sex addicts, and money mongers. These we always have with us. But the hunger for the authentic shows itself in the success of such films as *My Left Foot* and *The Fisher King*. This need for the real thing is even more intense when the gaze is directed toward the community of the people of God.

Disenchantment is not a bad thing whether political or ecclesiastical. It removes the veil of romanticism from our world view and provides a healthy realism. Authorities have clay feet as well as anyone else, whether those feet stand on political or ecclesial turf. With a naive innocence jolted into critical realism, the stage is set for the appearance of what is genuinely human. When it appears in the flesh, the seeker will know *that* it is authentic, often without knowing *what* that means.

Concretely, this means that addiction is out, and ecological awareness is in. Addiction is an adult pacifier; and being rooted in the earth is somehow coming home. It means that New Ageism is a dead end while people with the vision of a new age have much to tell us of future possibilities. The human potential movement wants to transform our consciousness, and nutritionists are already transforming our diets. Pro-choice supporters rally to the defense of freedom, while anti-abortion advocates call for attention about how freedom is used. Once just simply disillusioned over atomic power run wild, over an arrogant scientism and a technology that can all too readily betray us, awareness has come that choice determines how things will be.

AN ANALYSIS OF HUMAN AUTHENTICITY

Choice belongs to authentic humanness. With human authenticity as a central focus, I suggest that ecclesiology will need to be attentive to what Eugene Webb in a recent book calls the *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur,*

*Girard, Kierkegaard.*¹ In proposing that the ecclesial person of the future be genuinely human we are seeking someone with

a differentiation of consciousness leading toward a new, more reflective integration of the human agent as a rational and responsible performer of the intentional operations that constitute specifically human existence. (284)

The future belongs to those who not only *image* a distinctly authentic human presence in the world, but who can *explain* just what this means and intentionally move to *constitute* this human presence in the flesh. Assumptions regarding authentic human operation do underlie cultural phenomena. Such assumptions underpin economics, politics, the arts, and religion. An analysis of human authentic operation, possibly valid across cultures, enables such assumptions to be called into question. It is from our stance, often not declared, of what we think being human is, that decisions are made, opinions are formed, systems are created, and infrastructures are allowed to stand. The result can be massive oppression.

In attending to the reality of the person, the human agent who lies behind notions and accomplishments, we are focusing on the heart of what makes community possible, be it civic or ecclesial. The person is the source of human operations as attentive or unaware, intelligent or stupid, reasonable or rash, sensitively decisive or apathetic. We are the very selves that are the source and substance of community. The common meanings and values that constitute a community of persons are functions of consciousness, and consciousness belongs to human beings.

The human being as 'operator' can be and often is, neglected. Consciousness work can be highly subjective when it remains theoretical. The solution is to begin empirically, with repeated observation of recurrent patterns of one's own consciousness. Such patterns can then be charted, discussed, observed again, and verified. Such is Bernard Lonergan's starting place, and his findings can be useful here.²

From repeated observation Lonergan charts four groups of related operations. Because they build on one another, he calls them "levels," but in reality these sets of operations are the one unified human consciousness operating in a distinctively recognizable way.

Level one of human operation shows a repeated pattern of simple awareness of sense data. At this level, which Lonergan calls experiential, this data is merely received. (I pull up in front of my house and notice what looks like smoke coming out of one of my windows.) A shift takes place when questioning of the data begins. This second level, that of intelligent inquiry, includes the formation of ideas. (I turn off the ignition, run up the steps, and hurriedly get the door unlocked. All the while a flurry of questioning is going on. Did I leave the stove on? Is there a short in the wiring?) A shift in the type of questioning indicates movement to a third set of operations. From questions such as "What is this?" or "What is going on here?" the consciousness moves to "Is it correct?" or "Is it really smoke I see?" If the answer is no, there is a return to level two questioning. If yes, a judgment on the truth of the matter is tentatively reached, to be reconsidered only with the arrival of new data. (I dash into the house, discover a hot pad touching the edge of a burner on the electric stove. The burner was left slightly on, and after enough contact the hot pad has begun to smolder. This accounts for the wisps of smoke coming through the open window.)

Levels two and three are from a functional or operational perspective — what was known in faculty psychology as intellect. Lonergan locates objectivity at level three of conscious operation. At levels two and three the consciousness can remain quite cool and detached. But Lonergan detected another shift with the appearance of a third type of questioning. Now the question becomes "So what does it mean to you?" The eleven emotions identified by Aristotle, accepted by Aquinas, and verified today psychologically, now make their explicit appearance in consciousness, pressing for an answer to the question of value. (I sink into a kitchen chair, overwhelmed with relief.

Just in time! No fire — yet. Thank God! The freshly painted kitchen would have been ruined. What a disaster!) With this fourth level of operation the subject moves toward decision, choice, and act. (I promise myself to do a check of the stove whenever I leave the house in the future.) Functionally we are usually very aware of these operations of decision. This is the level where we live all day. Again, in terms of faculty psychology, such activity in consciousness was called the will.

At the root or depths of this fourth or existential level Lonergan detected the movement or experience of religious mystery. This depth movement in consciousness, although experienced by all, is described by few, and explained by almost no one. This is intimate space. How does one try to explain in words what is beyond words? Religious experience that results in change Lonergan names religious conversion. It manifests itself first on the fourth level of consciousness, the existential or conscience level, the level of choice. Seeking intellectual explanation follows, and the result is a transformed perspective on all incoming experiential data in light of the religious experience. Said simply, the person has now become not only attentively aware, intelligently inquisitive, reasonably convinced, and responsively committed, but religiously in love. There is a transformed person.

Lonergan proposes that this basic "method" is an analysis of what actually goes on in human consciousness, has gone on in human consciousness, and will continue to go on in human consciousness across cultures and despite religious differences. The data will be the data received and processed within the distinct symbol systems of a religion embedded in a unique culture, but the pattern goes on, recurrent and irreformable.

In terms of human authenticity the implications are clear. One is either attentive to all data at hand or one is selectively biased. One is intelligent in honest inquiry or questions are aborted and one remains selectively informed. One is reasonable in reaching conclusions or one is rash. One is sensitively responsive to what is valued as true, good, and beautiful or one

chooses not to be. One is in love beyond the human or one is not. With these four levels of observable operations Lonergan has given us a basis in conscious operation itself for what we call being "human." It is, as he himself says, only a beginning. If he is correct, and anyone can verify his charting by being attentive to his or her own operations, then we do indeed have a start for the global discussion of authentic humanness. If he is wrong, his analysis needs to be critiqued by disciplines that deal directly with consciousness, psychology and psychiatry.

THE ECCLESIAL IMPLICATIONS

A community can be identified as a group of persons who share common meanings and values. The community will be as credible as its members are credible. Its members will be credible to the extent that they are humanly authentic, and this authenticity rests radically on an awareness of something that is not confined to the human, namely Transcendent Mystery.

The church is such a community. Its religious experience or religious conversion is distinct in that it comes to us in the distinct symbol system of the incarnation of the divine Mystery in history in the person of Christ Jesus. The implications of Lonergan's analysis of consciousness as applied to the human consciousness of Jesus holds challenge for christology. Although this is not our focus here, the grounding of ecclesiology in the incarnation of the Word is essential. An understanding of the church will be as sound as that christology is sound. If that christology is docetic and detached, the ecclesiology will tend to be separate and aloof. As the christology seeks to plumb the meaning of the authentically functioning human consciousness of Jesus, so will ecclesiology have to take seriously the authentic functioning of the consciousnesses of the body that is the people of God.

Using the analysis that Lonergan sketches for us, we can now begin to detect the profile of the type of ecclesial person who is capable of moving us into the third millennium. We begin with a consideration of the importance of authentic Christian reli-

gious conversion. We can then look for the fruits: the moral formation that flows from this reality, the critical mind that is called into operation, and finally note how the ecclesial person actually acts out as a "real presence" in the global community.

Our procedure in beginning with the conversion question will be to follow the unfolding of authentic humanness as Lonergan maintains it actually happens in experience. What we actually experience is a being grasped by the holy which results in a first movement of response on our part (level four). Then comes the judgment that something profound has happened to us (level three). Next we find the questions rising: *What is this? Am I crazy? What does this mean?* (level two). Finally, the experience of an encounter with the holy will give a new "tone" to all our other experiences and perceptions. We are now a person-in-love. We now experience reality as such a person. There is a double movement here. In religious conversion the movement is from fourth level down. In ordinary day-to-day operations the movement is from experience to choice. In reality, it is precisely love rippling down as it were that frees the consciousness for creative movement toward choice.

The religious experience of the Christian is further differentiated by the Word as incarnate in Christ Jesus. This brings a specificity to revelation for the Christian that is not present in the revelation moving in other faith traditions. The authentically ecclesial person cannot separate him or herself from the sacredness of matter any more than the Word can now separate itself from the sacred humanity. Distinct they are, but separated they are not. It is from this marriage that the sacramentality that so characterizes genuine Catholic life springs. Authentic owning of this specific nature of religious experience identifies the Catholic christian immediately as a communal or ecclesial person. It is precisely through our humanness that we are in communion with the humanness of the Word and thus with the humanness of those others in communion with that Word made flesh. Our saving does not go on as rugged individuals. We are saved and finally healed in communion with others through and because of that sacred humanity to which we are joined publicly

in baptism. The authentically ecclesial person will then be identified by a "we" consciousness, not a predominant "me" consciousness. The ecclesial person of the next century will be the antithesis of the "rugged individual." He or she will be known by a refreshing sense of interdependence in contrast to a maudlin dependence or an isolated independence.

Second, this communal sense will remain as choices are made on the existential fourth level. It will remain as the conscience continues to be formed, despite the threats of racism, sexism, and individualism that permeate our culture. This sense of common good or interdependence is basic to the person who will image something other than what is acceptable in a culture that holds rugged individualism as a top priority. Morally this will mean a conscience that refuses to separate what is good for me from what is good for *us*. This will mean a growing sensitivity to the fact that there is really no such thing as a private sin. Personal, yes, but private, no, for all sin infects the body and had to be taken on by the Head. This radical communal consciousness will have ramifications regarding the concern for human beings anywhere. It will have implications for the choices that involve the use of resources also open to others, to the formation of economic policy, and the laws that are made or revised. It will influence the choices that flow from authority within the ecclesial community and in the civic arena. It will call for structures that replace policing with the challenge of the careful formation of personal conscience, and policing will be seen for what it really is: the attempt to displace the human need to be responsible for one's choices with a substitute external authority.

Second, the formation of such a responsibility will demand that one adequately inform oneself about whatever needs to be known. Anti-intellectual bias will be seen for what it is: a self-inflicted blindness. The ecclesial person we need, whether a campesino in Guatemala or the president of the World Bank will need to ask questions until all the needed information is there, and the mind simply quits asking. This means continual questioning and searching in areas that have to do with reproduc-

tion, politics, and theology, science, health care, and the environment. Questioning of the community itself needs to be celebrated not feared, for the goal is not simply to preserve, but to render credible and authentic for our questions in these times.

Finally, to an ever deepening and communal moral sensitivity and intelligent inquiry, I suggest that the authentically ecclesial person is sensually alive in the best sense of that word. To be attentively aware means to be alive in all of one's senses. It means that one sees what needs to be seen, whether that is the wrinkled beauty of a loved one's face or the horror of a mutilated priest in El Salvador. It means hearing with joy the blending of my own small voice in worship with that sea of sound around me, and hearing with rage the lies that deceive a people into believing that their lot is to be poor so that God can reward them after death. It means attentiveness to the touch of the lover in my own marriage bed, and the tenderness of the hug of a child so spontaneously given. Most of all, it means the celebration and thus the discernment of how much, when, where, and with whom this celebration can be a genuinely human expression.

CONCLUSION

I would like to think that we have the makings of genuinely ecclesial people already in our midst. I have met them. Perhaps if we could say out loud what we are really looking for we could get about the job of calling each other forth into just what we need, and settling for nothing less. Is this idealism? Perhaps, but an idealism rooted in realism, I hope. Is it so impossible to think that we might have communally conscious people among both the baptized and ordained, a communal sense that is grounded in the humanity assumed by the Word of God? Can we hope that such a union would form the basis for moral conscience and the daily choices that flow from that conscience? Can we look for a people who intelligently question everything in love? Can we call for a people so attentive to what they see, hear, and feel that nothing escapes them, neither in the church nor on the global scene? If so, then I think we are ready to

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become and call others to become authentic ecclesial persons for the new millennium that is about to open before us.

ENDNOTES

1. See Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1988). The book, according to Merold Westphal (TS 51, 1990, 150-151) needs a sharper focus, but still presents the challenge of looking to those who attempt to give an account of what goes on in human consciousness. This offers some empirical ground on which to stand to avoid the seeming relativism of various epistemologies.
2. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), chapter one. More detailed explanation of the basic "method" discussed in this chapter can be found in *Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988). Frederick Crowe, ed., chapters 14, 15, and 16.