

Sensitive to Community, Beyond Ourselves



Some years ago I was challenged by a Bishop regarding an article I'd written. We were talking in his office and the tone eventually got a little testy: "How can you write something like that?" he asked. "Because it's true," was my blunt reply. He already knew it was true, but now, realizing that, he became more aware of his real agenda: "Yes, I know it's true, but that doesn't mean it should be said in that way in a Catholic newspaper like ours. This isn't a university classroom or the New York Times. It's a diocesan newspaper and that's not the best context within which to say something like that. It will confuse a lot of readers."

I'm not immune to pride and arrogance and so my spontaneous reaction was defensive. Immediately there were certain voices in me saying: "I am only saying what's true. The truth needs to be spoken. Why are you afraid to hear the truth? Are we really doing people a favor by shielding them from things they'd rather not hear?"

But I'm glad I swallowed my pride, bit my tongue, muttered a half-sincere apology, and walked out of his office without saying any of those things out loud because, after my initial feelings had subsided and I'd had a more sober and prayerful reflection on our conversation, I realized he was right. Having the truth is one thing, speaking it in a place and a manner that's helpful is quite another. It's not for nothing that Jesus challenged us to speak our truth in parables because truth, as T.S. Eliot once quipped, cannot always be swallowed whole and the context and tone within which it is spoken generally dictate whether it's helpful or not to speak it at a given time or to a given person. Simply put, it isn't always helpful, or charitable, or mature, to throw a truth into someone's face.

St. Paul says as much in his Epistle to the Romans in words to this effect: We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves. (Romans 15, 1) That can come across as patronizing, as if Paul were telling a certain elite to tone down some of their enlightened views and actions for the sake of those who are less enlightened, but that's not what's at stake here. Undergirding this kind of admonition is a fundamental distinction that's critically important in our teaching, preaching, and pastoral practice, namely, the distinction between Catechesis and Theology, the distinction between nurturing and shoring-up someone's faith as opposed to stretching someone's faith so as to make it more universally compassionate.

Catechesis is meant to teach doctrine, teach prayers, teach creeds, clarify biblical and church teachings, and give people a solid, orthodox framework within which to understand their Christian faith.

Theology, on the other hand, presupposes that those studying it are already catechized, that they already know their creeds and prayers and have a solid, orthodox foundation. Theology's function, among other things, is then to stretch its students in function of giving them the symbolic tools with which to understand their faith in a way that leaves no dark, hidden corners into which they are afraid to venture for fear of shaking their faith. Catechesis and Theology have different functions and must respect each other since both are needed: Young seedling plants need to be protected and gently nurtured; just as older, mature plants have to be given the wherewithal to live and thrive inside all the environmental challenges in which they find themselves.

Thus the challenge coming to me from the bishop was, in effect, to be more careful with my audience so as to distinguish theology classrooms and academic periodicals from catechetical situations and church newspapers.

It carried too a special challenge to humility and charity, such as was, for example, shown by the scientist-philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Elderly, retired, and in declining health, he still found himself "silenced" by the Vatican in that we has forbidden to publish his theological thoughts. But, rather than reacting with anger and arrogance, he reacted with charity and humility. Writing to his Jesuit Provincial, acknowledges needs beyond his own: "I fully recognize that Rome may have its own reasons for judging that, in its present form, my concept of Christianity may be premature or incomplete and that at the present moment its wider diffusion may therefore be inopportune. ... [This letter] is to assure you that, in spite of any apparent evidence to the contrary, I am resolved to remain a child of obedience. Obviously, I cannot abandon my own personal search – that would involve me in an interior catastrophe and in disloyalty to my most cherished vocation; but I have ceased to propagate my ideas and am confining myself to achieving a deeper personal insight into them."

Recognizing the importance of sensitivity as to where and how we speak the truth, Jesus advises: "Speak your truth in parables."

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