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CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT CHARACTER

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More years ago than I care to remember, someone convinced me that reading was conversation in disguise; that the printed page was an incomplete transcription of half a dialogue. Because so few opportunities arise to reveal the full dialogue, I gladly welcomed this opportunity to continue the conversations about character and character development with Yocum Mize and Lickona. Their ideas deserve more than review or critique; they call out for discussion, engagement, and application. "Great Conversations" are constrained by neither time nor place. And because this is an open discourse, please join in!

CHARACTER

By way of background, "character" comes from the Greek word for an instrument used to inscribe a mark. The Middle English definition, "imprint on the soul," elevated the mystery of the concept from its engraving roots. What mattered was not the stick but the soul; not the method of imprinting but the mark left on the soul. I think we would agree, that imprinting the soul is an enormously complex, incremental, and cumulative process. It is a journey of successive moral resolutions to ever-changing situations; tomorrow, or next hour, will present new confrontations with what was thought to have been solved. The destination, a soul rightly imprinted, reflects the coherence of duty (right thinking), desire (conscience and the commitment to do right), and action (doing right). We need to talk about how to draw the whole moral village together to create the synergy for moral development.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

While not summarizing or comparing the articles, I want to examine some themes for our continuing conversation. Yocum Mize and Lickona posit that gospel countercultures function through Scriptural frameworks and that cultures without such frameworks can have negative effects on the Gospel. What are we to make of the evidence that American Catholic youth differ little from their non-Catholic, even non-Christian, counterparts? that fewer and fewer American Catholic youth live out the counter-cultural values of the Gospel? that the fading sense of sin and the lack of spiritual vitality have formed them to the secular culture? that the lack of a spiritual vision hinders any transformation in Christ?

Yocum Mize portrays how the transformation of one individual helped counter a culture's press on its own workers. Without dispute, Dorothy Day lived an extraordinary life. However, it is not the extraordinary that I want to discuss, but rather the ordinary—her celebration of the mundane. How blessed she was to have had someone, even someone blind to God, help her discover and celebrate “the wonders of the ordinary that make up a life.” Too often, educators focus on the few extraordinary events of life rather than the tough stuff of everyday living. How refreshing to be reminded that Christian morality is living the ordinary in extraordinary ways; that Godliness is doing the “whatsoevers” for God’s glory.

Day also displayed that the moral life is a collage of near-misses, successes, temporary advances, and out-and-out failures. That which elevates this collage to the Christian is not perfection, but something more. “That something more, to put it bluntly, is grace, the gift of the love of God.” Grace releases the transformative power of God to work through the mundane. But before one can recognize “the ever-present possibility of God’s transformative power manifesting itself in and through life’s circumstances,” one must, like Dorothy Day, be “rooted in the interpretive framework shaped by Scripture” and prayer. Only then can we unmask the supernatural masquerading as the mundane.

A corollary of the ordinary, the mundane, is the now. In the parable of the rich farmer, God reminds us that all we have is now—there is neither promise nor guarantee of tomorrow. We Westerners have a love-hate relationship with the present. Our confusion over the relationship of the present to the past and future leads to a distortion of the ordinary—and the now. Dorothy Day’s perspective on eternity (not the future) transformed the mundane into the holy. Giving a cup of cold water is a holy act; planning to dig a well but never giving the cup of water is like the farmer tearing down old barns to build new and bigger ones. The eternal perspective does not presume on tomorrow. Eternity is not endless tomorrows, but endless today’s; it is that continual intersection of the sacred and the now. “Ritual punctuates the humdrum of every day communal life with the in-breaking of the sacred.” Amen.

Finally, I think we should talk about the portrayal of saints or “special ones” as moral exemplars. Moral/character educators often take a curious twist when presenting exemplars. That the bohemian life styles of St. Augustine or Dorothy Day, for example, were instrumental in forming their character cannot be denied. Yet moral educators often substitute who they became for how they developed; their products (thoughts or teachings) replace their process (thinking); words replace formation. Cynics among us may label this the “do-as-I-say, not-as-I-do” approach to moral development; critics may wonder why we try to form by down-playing the formation of the greatest exemplars. Educators need to pay more attention to how the “special ones” got to be special! I think we need to talk about this.

CRISIS OF CHARACTER

Christian moral development is more than learning traditional values, acquiring character traits, or even developing principled moral judgments through reflection and perspective taking. Over 80 years ago, Hartshorne (1915) called for religious educators to seek a higher organizational perspective, to take the

... step from morality to religion. The religious life is the one that seeks such organization. The level of the religious attainment is measured both by the degree of organization and by the quality of the ideals and purposes that control the life. The Christian character is the one that is organized consciously around the will of the Christian God. (pp. 1-2)

Christian character is developed by Christian ways of thinking rather than Christian thoughts and instructions about how to act. Learning how to think through moral dilemmas, even moral failures, is prerequisite to living morally. St. Peter knew the right actions and answers; it just took him a while to make them his own. Living a Godly life presumes thinking in a Godly manner.

A NARROW BUT NOT STRAIGHT PATH

Both Yocum Mize and Lickona ponder the complex interactions between the broad culture and a faith community as well as how these interactions influence individuals. Although Lickona’s “comprehensive approach to character development” presumes a faith culture, he is also concerned about how the culture influences the individual. Furthermore, he explores how a faith community in general can become a critical catalyst in personal and social transformation and how Catholic schools in particular can become counter-cultural institutions.

The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977 identified the task of any Catholic school as fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith and a synthesis of faith and life. This straightforward statement begs the question of whether some aspects of faith and a particular culture are mutually exclusive. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) stated the problem this way:

Sometimes there is an uncertainty, a difference of opinion, or an uneasiness about the underlying principles governing religious formation in a Catholic school. On the one hand, a Catholic school is a "civic institution"; its aim, methods and characteristics are the same as those of every other school. On the other hand, it is a "Christian community," whose educational goals are rooted in Christ and his Gospel. It is not always easy to bring these two aspects into harmony; the task requires constant attention, so that the tension between a serious effort to transmit culture and a forceful witness to the Gospel does not turn into a conflict harmful to both. (pp. 33-34)

The path between aloofness from the secular culture and an uncritical acceptance of that culture is narrow and winding. Editors of *America* (1994) highlight the tension Catholic schools face when they attempt

to provide an education that will enable their students to combine the life of an authentic Christian with that of a fully involved and useful American citizen. This means that U. S. Catholic schools...walk a middle way between Orthodox yeshivas, in which religious studies occupy most of the curriculum, and public schools, in which not only religious instruction but also any moral instruction that draws upon religious convictions, motivations, and sanction has no place. (p. 3)

It is this very tension that provides the fertile ground for a faith discourse. The faith culture envisioned by Lickona includes the academic and extracurricular cultures of the school. However, if "the highest purpose of the curriculum is moral and spiritual," is a focus on "the natural intersections between the curriculum... and virtues" enough? Should not the goal be integration instead of intersection? By integration I mean not the distorted notion of mixing things together, but rather richness and wonder of wholeness: of truth and virtue, sacred and mundane, and eternal and now.

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) succinctly described the process of Catholic schooling "as an organic set of elements with a single purpose: the gradual development of every capability of every student, enabling each one to attain an integral formation within a context that includes the Christian religious dimension and recognizes the help of grace" (p. 52). This integral formation, this integrated wholeness, presupposes "that religious values and motivation are cultivated in all subject areas, and indeed, in all of the various activities going on in the school" (p. 56).

In his address to the priests of the diocese of Rome, John Paul II linked integral formation to an integrated curriculum: “A school has as its purpose the students’ integral formation. Religious instruction, therefore, should be integrated into the objectives and criteria which characterize a modern school” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, p. 35). But it is here that we must beware of the dangerous assumption that an integrated curriculum is “the pointed stick” that forms the inner person. Again, we need to remember that God’s grace employs a variety of “pointed sticks” to work the wonders of integral formation.

DANGER OR OPPORTUNITY?

The Chinese character for “crisis” is the combination of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” In a literary twist on this combination, C. S. Lewis (1955) turned an intriguing title, “Lilies that Fester,” into a provocative attack:

“Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” The higher the pretensions of our rulers [teachers] are, the more meddlesome and impertinent their rule is likely to be and the more the thing in whose name they rule will be defiled. (p. 48)

Never one to mince words, Lewis denied that words and talk could create qualities of being. The very idea that one could make an “imprint on the soul” with words alone—well, it just stinks! To him, it was deceptive to imply that a state of being, whether refinement, culture, or character, can either “become an object of consciousness” or be produced by direct instruction (p. 32). The danger that a character education curriculum could substitute the right answers for a well-formed conscience was too great a risk for Lewis. I suspect he would have been much more comfortable with the following:

The sacred Synod affirms that children and young people have the right to be stimulated to make sound moral judgments based on a well-formed conscience and to put them into practice with a sense of personal commitment, and to know and love God more perfectly. (Declaration on Christian Education, 1965).

This first section of Vatican II’s *Declaration on Christian Education* (1965) both summarizes and brings this article full circle. “Con-science” means a knowing with: Christian education aims toward knowing and loving God and internalizing a “knowing-with” him. Without a Scriptural framework, the old adage “let your conscience be your guide” is dangerous: for “a ‘good conscience’ is enjoyed as a rule only by really bad people, criminals

and such, while only 'good people' are capable of having a bad conscience" (Arendt, 1971, p. 5). The 20th century in particular has given names and faces to bad people whose knowledge exceeded their moral framework. Lacking the direction of a moral compass, their consciences failed to restrain them from almost unimaginable evil.

The Synod's declaration of the above right implies our responsibilities to provide the appropriate stimulation, practice, and conditions for the "well-formed conscience" for God's imprint on the soul.

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