



Youth, Cultural Agency, and the Confirming of the Church's Commitment*

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The route for understanding the issues affecting youth's call to commitment, which is in part what confirmation is about, lies in understanding youth in their social contexts, including the context of the church. My reflections here are themselves grounded in a context, that of the Roman Catholic tradition, and so the examples I use to concretize my ideas come from Roman documents. Since particularity both grounds and points to universals, I permit myself to speak in a Roman Catholic voice, in hopes that my position may be helpful to others.

Before locating youth in the church, "a" church, I first locate them in culture. When the church understands well the mega-influence of culture on the young, it can then appreciate both the limitations and the possibilities of its own zone of influence.

I. A DESCRIPTION OF CULTURE

The description of culture I find most useful is the one offered by the late British scholar, Raymond Williams. Williams' approach to culture offers us a concrete way of thinking about and examining the processes by which a culture is produced. It thus demystifies the obscure notion of culture held by many people. Williams describes culture as "a *signifying system* [emphasis his] through which...a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored."¹

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¹Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1982) 13.

the statements of many religious thinkers today I find few mentioning Williams by name but many whose insights correlate with his.

Every social order needs a signifying system to communicate its inner core in various modes: in conceptual categories but also in non-logical symbols, such as images, heroes and heroines, rituals, and narratives. The signifying system sets forth a particular social order's story of reality, that is, its imagination of what the human project is all about. The most paining question I can ask myself about my own undergraduate students is: Who are your heroes or heroines? These are the ones who make concretely imaginable and pursuable the goals proposed by the culture. Besides giving rise to helpfully painful questions, Williams' description also describes the church itself, which is a social order with its own symbols, rituals, heroes and

heroines, and with its own imagination of the purpose of the human project. As a goal, the church's social order is called the kingdom; and as a current embodiment of efforts toward that goal, it is called the ecclesia.

We who strive for a living discipleship dwell then in two cultures, and so do those young people we invite to join us in this struggle. One is the wider social culture of our nation and its economic system; the other is the narrower religious culture that exists within the wider "secular" culture. An important difference separates these two cultures. The narrower, religious one makes a bold and overt claim that *its* meanings are ultimate and hold a decisive place in directing the behavior of those embracing these meanings. *These* meanings are salvific. Since the religious culture's meanings are prior, they relativize the claims of other social orders and signifying systems.

This rendition sounds compact and neat until we realize that the wider culture also claims that its meanings are ultimate, but rarely does so explicitly. The wider culture's claim is implicit and quietly made as an assumption about reality. Ironically, the implicit claim can be more powerful than the explicit one. Hard enough to counter a claim not clearly made; harder still to challenge a claim not admitted to exist.

II. THE CHURCH AND THE WIDER CULTURE

As a signifying system by which a social order is communicated, the church is not against the wider culture. Standing squarely within that wider culture, it welcomes and applauds every feature fostering the authentic humanization of persons. Because it embraces Jesus' imagination of human possibilities, the church rejoices in the ways social systems promote the human project. However, the church is clearly a zone of judgment, assessing both the social order and its signifying system by the criteria of its own meanings, i.e., Jesus' vision of the dignity of persons. A proper formula for the way these assessments are made might be: Quick to affirm what enriches the human project but unafraid to point out what diminishes it.

Actually the church as a tradition carries within it vestiges of the positive features of the many cultures within which it has existed. Its music, its rituals, its dogmatic formulations, its forms of communication, and its polities have been influenced by twenty centuries of embracing what was truly humanizing in the various cultures it met. This positive influence on the church still continues in varied ways, such as the application of management science to the coordination of

ministries in dioceses. What I am saying is that, yes, the church exists within the wider culture but also that the wider culture exists to an extent within the church—and it is here that I have to add, not always in positive ways. Patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, polities that operate out of domination-subordination thinking—vestiges of these inhumanities can continue to infect the church. When Roman Catholics wince at the brutal intolerance to dissent and hostility to reform in their own history, some Lutherans must likewise wince at Luther's connivance with the German princes of his day and his exhortations to unquestioning obedience to them.

The church as a zone of judgment functions then in two ways. It judges the wider culture at the same time it itself is judged by the gospel. The gospel, in its ideal of the kingdom announced by Jesus, constantly brings the church in its local, regional, and international

embodiments before the bar of its own criteria. Embedded in all the books of the New Testament one can find examples of this kind of inner judgment.

III. YOUTH AND CULTURE

There are no youth problems that are not in fact human problems, found among all age groups but now come to roost among the young. When Donald Trump is the hero explicitly admired, and greed the implicit value craved, we have an example of this theorem. With the prevalence of electronic communications, especially electronic storytelling, everyone, including youth, has unlimited access to compelling, acted-out versions of reality. Especially through television everyone has access to vivid imaginations of what life is all about. In consumerist capitalism, many of these imaginations are part of a strategy for orchestrating consumption. They are paid for by commercial interests. They are shown in a context that stresses the centrality of having, and often enough the stories themselves involve dramatizations of good and evil, with the good being the good of having and the evil being that of having one's goods snatched away.

Here we have a world of signification being packaged for people. It is not the culture of the people but the culture concocted for the people's consumption. The main kind of agency envisaged for people is to watch someone else's story and then buy the products behind it. To some extent, thus far not fully addressed, electronic communications tend to diminish cultural agency among many people—they tend to be living in someone else's world of meaning and tend to be passive or mute when it comes to articulating their own world of meaning.

How do religious meanings fare in such a cultural climate? In answering, one principle must be kept clear: *Religious meanings do not maintain themselves*. Because religious meanings represent realities not easily evident, those meanings need to be worked at actively if they are to retain their hold on our imaginations. Religious meanings cannot be maintained without cultural agency on the part of all those involved. This fact is actually what is behind the idea that regular participation at worship is a potentially important part of religious living. Without gathering with a chorus of others who hold these meanings in common, the meanings themselves can come to seem illusory.

Christianity has used many procedures to maintain its religious meanings. All of them are forms of cultural agency, calling people to work with and on the

meanings that bind the community together. The goal of such work is the practice of discipleship. The basic procedure called for in a time of increasing cultural passivity is dialogue towards living out the meanings in specific forms of practice. Dialogue is an authentic and key form of any cultural agency, but the seminal form of religious cultural agency. As a grappling with the religious zone of signification and with the religious problematic, dialogue lays the groundwork for testing the truth claims of a religion by the acid test of practice.

IV. CONTRADICTIONS IN CHURCH TEACHING AND PRACTICE: A ROMAN CATHOLIC CASE

Examining the teaching of John Paul II shows that again and again from the beginning of his pontificate he has stressed human person as subject, as agent, as living sacrament of God's presence. He has condemned treating the person as object, as instrument and means, instead of

end. One text from *Redemptor hominis* says,

The essential meaning of this...“dominion” of man [sic] over the visible world ...consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and the superiority of spirit over matter....Each stage of [present day] progress must...be x-rayed from this point of view. What is in question is the advancement of persons, not just the multiplying of things that people can use....Indeed there is already a real perceptible danger that, while man’s dominion over the world of things is making enormous advances, he should lose the essential threads of his dominion and in various ways let his humanity be subjected to the world and become himself something subject to manipulation in many ways—even if the manipulation is often not perceptible directly—through the whole of the organization of community, through the production system and through pressure from the means of social communication. Man cannot relinquish himself or the place in the visible world that belongs to him; he cannot become the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of his own products.²

Similar stress on person as agent, producer, worker, initiator, collaborator, creator, and maker is the underlying theme of *Laborem exercens*, as can be seen in the following texts:

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate, because as the “image of God” he [sic] is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.... Work corresponds to this basic biblical concept only when throughout the process man manifests himself and confirms himself as the one who “dominates.” This dominion, in a certain sense, refers to the subjective dimension even more than to the objective one. This dimension conditions the very ethical nature of work. In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say, a subject who decides about himself.³

²The text is from *Origins* 8/40 (22 March 1979) 635 col. 2.

³Quoted by Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 105-6.

Man is treated as an instrument of production, whereas he—he alone, independent of the work he does—ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator.⁴

We must emphasize and give prominence to the primacy of man in the production process, the primacy of man over things. Everything contained in the concept of capital in the strict sense is only a collection of things. Man, as the subject of work and independent of the work he does—man alone is a person. This truth has

important and decisive consequences.⁵

Such texts highlight the principle that all persons have not only a right to income but also a right to production, that is, to engage in processes of production. Income allows a person to become a consumer, but the pope insists that every person has a natural right also to produce, not just consume.

Among Roman Catholics this principle has yet to be consistently applied to adult lay persons in local communities. As far as I can determine, the youth ministry efforts that in fact influence young people toward discipleship do so because they allow the young to become co-producers of the religious culture in which they stand. And the efforts that are failing are those that reduce young people to the status of consumers, accepting doctrinal capital on a “handout” basis and putting it to good use. Such a process is quite different from laying open to them the community’s resources and inviting them to use these for engaging in the production of meaning: through dialogue, through struggling with the problematic of today’s world, through allowing the keen questioning of assumptions, including doctrinal ones, found among many young people, and especially through action for justice. And it is only by participating actively in this religious culture as a co-producer that a person truly enters it as a zone of judgment exposing what is unacceptable in the wider culture.

Participation in the life of the community of the church means participation in the creation of the culture of the church, in the sense that one comes to an authentic, and possibly an original, word about the quest for discipleship in our time. The culture of the local church emerges from the struggles of many individuals to express in words and deeds their option for the gospel and the outcome of that option. But nobody participates in the creation of culture without participation in the creation or re-forming of the polity of that culture. To have a say in the production of the culture of the local church means likewise having a say in the way its power is used.

The stumbling block to the full participation of the young in the church is that they are invited to participate in the reproduction of religious meaning but not in the true, original production of that meaning. Full participation in the life of the church becomes culturally authentic only to the extent that participants have the opportunity to speak to the policies that affect them, to struggle to name the values for which they will suffer, to communicate to others those values, and to be confronted by the values lived by others. Nothing shuts off this process as fully as manifestos and proclamations handed down from on high. Put more simply, participation is full when it is fully dialogical. In true dialogue what is reproduced

⁴Ibid., 107.

⁵Ibid., 119.

is not the set answers or positions of elites but the back-and-forth process that led to the positions themselves. In some Vatican documents, I find an incomplete understanding of cultural agency in the church and of the dangers flowing from such misunderstanding. Almost in contradiction to other, glowing passages about lay participation, the former kinds of statements suggest that in the end lay persons in general, but the young in particular, have quite limited forms of church participation. Overlooking the differences between cultural production and cultural reproduction,

such passages claim that the true ecclesial agency remains in the hands of an elite, who by the very nature of their power, cannot be contested. For the others, the non-elites, their muteness is to be disrupted only by their passive amens.

Some might construe my words here as hard ones and my critique as harsh. I make the critique out of concern for the deep dilemma many lay persons face in seeking true forms of participation in the church. In a time when electronic communications invite us to the “illusory participative,” that is, to enter the slick and easily entertaining visions of life absorbed from the electronic dream machines, the church has a powerful antidote if it will invite its people, including the young, to enter an alternative world of meaning enriched by Jesus’ imagination, a world of meaning in which one is meant to be actively engaged as a co-producer, not as a consumer. To enter actively but a step at a time into the mindset of Jesus by embracing the poor and society’s victims is to enter also a zone of judgment, using the lens of God’s ways, the lens of the kingdom, as a basic way of seeing the world. To enable young people to enter that signifying system is a great liberating gift to them.

V. CULTURAL AGENCY AND CONFIRMATION

Pierre Bourdieu makes a comment about how “schemes are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness.”⁶ In other words practices can become institutionalized and fixed but without attaining the level of discourse and the kind of scrutiny discourse offers. I hope to apply the above ideas about youth and culture and Bourdieu’s call for discourse on practice to the problem of confirmation in the following outline of points for reflection.

1. The forced reception of any sacrament nullifies its sacramental validity. The problem of confirmation is that of enabling the young to cast their lot with Jesus in a religious adventure whose full implications cannot be foreseen. External pressures to “submit” to confirmation actually go against the nature of the sacrament itself. What would such pressures be? *Family pressures*, as when the family expects the young person to be confirmed and would see hesitation as a sign of a religious collapse. *Peer pressures*, as when one’s friends are being confirmed and one just goes along with the crowd. *Time pressures*, as when the date is determined by a bishop’s schedule rather than the readiness of a particular candidate. *Quasi-religious pressures*, as when a person is under the misunderstanding that one cannot marry in the church unless one has been confirmed. If marriages entered without full freedom are regularly annulled, perhaps we need to consider a process for confirmation annulments.

⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 87-88.

These problems or misunderstandings have to be, and can be, worked out for those making confirmation in their late teens, though the difficulty in doing so will be in direct ratio to how the young people have been treated when younger. If earlier catechesis was lacking in true participation, dialogue, and inquiry, and if their religious assent was always taken for granted, the young will have difficulty recognizing the crucial difference choice makes for a sacrament.

Twenty years ago a study of youth in Lutheran congregations uncovered the following situation.

For most youth there is a sense of being on the outside of their congregation's interest and life. Over half the youth (ages 15-23) feel that older people in the congregation are suspicious of them. They also feel that they have no influence on the decisions being made by the congregation. In other words, the institutional life of the congregation has evolved in such a way that leadership and influence is in the hands of people over 30. Up to one-half of the youth agree that "hardly anyone in the congregation would miss me if I stopped going."⁷

2. Current thinking about the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults generally acknowledges that the end of the pre-catechumenate is reached only when an adult knows enough about the Lord, his word, and his church to make an intelligent decision to seek admission. This means that readiness is the key factor. Readiness can be seen ever more clearly in the end of the catechumenate. When a person shows s/he is ready and able to practice the understandings of the gospel, that is, when the person has become in some sense adept at practice, only then has readiness for baptism been reached.

In the catechumenate, such readiness has been reached only by a protracted commitment of the community to take seriously the formation of the person involved. We know now that infant baptism is a clear commitment of the community to foster the Christianization of the person. A child may not be baptized unless there is evidence that the parents intend to raise the child as a Christian. And so, on-going formation must be the intent of the community in relation to the family and of the family in relation to the infant.

During the childhood years, the appropriate mode of the community's care is one of delicate attentiveness rather than of peremptory command, of the light touch of loving invitation rather than of heavy-handed obligation. If confirmation is ever put in its rightful place within the rite of baptism, the full complexity of the community's baptismal commitment to an emerging life in the Spirit will at last be clear. To state the point more baldly: confirmation is first *the community's commitment* to take seriously the faith-growth of this person, and only secondarily that person's eventual commitment. Confirmation, as the sacrament of the community's commitment to be faithful to the Spirit present in its midst and to hand on that Spirit to all its members, needs much more reflection than it has received so far.

A fine New Testament passage to guide the catechesis of children and youth might be 1 Thess 2:7-9, where the writer expresses a delicate catechetical attitude:

While we were among you we were as gentle as any nursing mother fondling her little ones. So well-disposed were we to you, in fact, that we wanted to share with you *not only God's tidings, but our very lives*, so dear had you become to us.

⁷Merton Strommen et al., *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 255-256.

You must recall, friends, our efforts and our toil: how we worked day and night all the time we preached God's good tidings to you in order not to impose on you in any way. (NAB)

What a fitting motto for every parish catechetical program: "Not only God's Tidings, But Our

Very Lives!”

3. My final point is a reminder that in the early church the catechumen was understood to exercise a ministry within the assembly: that of eliciting from the body of believers ever more original accounts of the faith that was within them. In this sense the catechumens kept the church alive to its own need for critical re-examination. That is the angle from which I would like to see confirmation approached.

I wonder what would happen if in all the denominations we encouraged our young people to search out those communities that showed by the signs of their own commitments that they did indeed make real in their area the good news proclaimed by Jesus. They fed the hungry; they visited the sick; they clothed the naked. They walked the way of non-violence. They consistently sided with society’s victims and marginal ones. They renounced the poms of the commodity culture and instead embraced the risks of solidarity with victims. What would happen if we encouraged our young to go to such groups and ask to walk along with them on the way of discipleship? Would they join a church in your denomination at all? This is a confirmation question it might do us all some good to ponder.