

Refelction on the Ministry of Education at LMF, June 16, 2002

This is an occasion for me to stop and think for a few moments on teaching Grade Sevens at LMF. Three categories of learning come to mind: instruction about God, about others, and about our spiritual journey. What else is there?

I. First then, “*Something About God*”.

Interestingly, a “teacher” of the law once asked Jesus for some enlightenment, an education if you like, about the most important commandment. The text reads: “ ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.” (Matt 22:36-38)

One writer comments:

“The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel ... said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus' suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: to *love God*.” (*Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* New York: Crossroad, 1995, p. 272)

A reprobate priest, at the conclusion of a Graham Greene novel, declares: “In the end, we all aspire to become saints.” The intense yearning we know, the ultimate fulfillment of every longing, the quintessential realization of humanity’s desiring, is *union with God*. Saint Irenaeus wrote centuries ago: “[T]he son of God became the Son of man, that man also might become the son of God.”

This embrace of transcendence clusters around two dynamics: *kenosis* or self-emptying (like Jesus – Philippians 2), and *theosis*, or partaking in God’s nature (like Jesus – II Peter 1:4).

This is the final purpose of education for the church, in Sunday School and in every other aspect of its life. Union with God.

II. Then there is “*Something About Others*” to teach.

For how does love of God, union with God, show? By concrete love of neighbour and enemy. John writes: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” (I Jn 4:20) This is the second primary purpose of the church’s educational programs: to move its adherents towards embrace of the other near, and the enemy afar.

Jesus in fact went on to say to that same legal expert, “And the second [commandment] is like [the first]: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” (Matt 22:39)

Though one can be “good without God”, goodness over time is doubtfully sustainable motivationally without God, perhaps also philosophically, and often in any event excludes love of enemies. Witness the near universal vengeful response to the September

11 tragedy. (Okay, most Christians also endorsed the billion-dollar-a-month bombing campaign in Afghanistan!)

One can however likewise say the great error of Christianity is the assumption that love of God will automatically create love of other. James' pithy postulates are pertinent: "... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:17); and "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." (James 2:18) The actions listed by James all reflect Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: namely, service to, and embrace of, neighbour and enemy.

Authentic Christian education attempts to instil love of enemy as test case of love of neighbour. It likewise points to love of neighbour as test case of love of God. Søren Kierkegaard wrote: "Love to God and love to neighbour are like two doors that open simultaneously, so that it is impossible to open the one without opening the other, and impossible to shut one without also shutting the other."

Christian education knows no exception clause in its call to love the other.

III. There is finally the eliciting of an appropriate *Spirituality*.

Christian education is about nurturing a *spirituality* that constantly holds love of God and neighbour/enemy together in creative tension. An Orthodox theologian calls this, "living in communion". The glue of such a spiritual life is, he explains, *forgiveness*, forgiveness which an Evangelical theologian dubs the "life craft" of the Christian – and of our common humanity.

Listen carefully to this Orthodox theologian's profound reflection on forgiveness:
" 'Your brother is your life.' I have no self in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other. The Trinitarian character of God is a metaphysical absolute here, so to speak. God's own self is another—his Son, to use Christian evangelical terms. The same thing happens on the human level; so the minute I don't feel deeply that my real self is the other, then I'll have no reason to forgive anyone. But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerge only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty, weak, and so on, that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide." (*Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, "Forgiveness", Volume XII, Number 3, August 1987, p. 51.)

IV. In *Conclusion*:

The ministry of teaching at LMF attempts to inculcate love of God and love of neighbour/enemy by eliciting a spirituality that practises the life craft of forgiveness.

If even a little of that is accomplished, the effort has been worthwhile.