

Life experiences shed light on faith

Last week I wrote about a group first known as the Young Catholic Leaders (now called The Catholic Leadership Forum). I touched upon the origins of the group, some of the qualities I have noted in them and two of the activities in which they have become engaged.

Writing that piece got me thinking more about the healthy spiritual thirst these young adults manifest and their gift for posing critical questions to the likes of me when they have concerns about aspects of the church's teaching or pastoral direction.

I find conversation with them to be very stimulating because, as I have indicated to you, such interchange forces me to look at old questions in fresh ways and allows me to see possibilities I would otherwise have missed. But I want to add that I welcome that kind of conversation for more than just personal reasons. I welcome it because I judge that kind of respectful dialogue to be essential to the good health of the church.

When people with questions about their faith or their life, or the relationship between the two, feel free to raise their questions in the community, at least two very good things happen.

First, the questioners are helped to locate their concerns in the context of our faith tradition, which is often more understanding and inclusive of their views than they imagined it to be.

Second, their willingness to bring their

along the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

questions to the community in that way strengthens a tradition, which, at its best, is a living one that can be deepened by contributions of each generation.

If you would like some examples of the kinds of issues they raise, I would mention the following: 1) the relationship between conscience and the teaching authority of the church; 2) the essentials of our faith; 3) the disposition of the church relative to the ordination of women and married people; 4) the importance of community, celebration and preaching in their lives; and 5) some issues of sexuality such as family planning, and respect for and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the church.

It's important to add here that the kind of discourse described above is unsettling for some members of our community. In their view it can suggest that the content of our faith or the principles by which we make our moral decisions are determined more by popular vote than by their rootedness in God's revelation to us in Christ. In other in-

stances, their concern is that we continue to probe such matters after they have been settled, and in a way that places us in opposition to the express wishes of the Holy Father.

One of the lessons for us in this kind of discourse may be that the members of each generation need to appropriate and express their faith according to their experiences and the best lights God gives them. It may be messy at times, but messiness, it seems to me, is a small price to pay to participate in a tradition that is truly alive.

I try to assure people so concerned that neither element is part of my design or intention. Nor have I ever thought them to be behind the questioning and probing of the people to whom I have referred above. Rather, I judge the common quest to be to let the light of faith shine on our experience of life and to let our experience of life expand and deepen our understanding of our faith.

That dialogue between faith and life has always been a part of the church's unfolding story, although the vigor and consistency of the dialogue have varied in different generations. Folks of my age remember the '50s when the conversation was quite subdued, almost nonexistent at the popular level. And we remember the '60s when it was vigorous and exciting. Now we are in another decade and the exchange is of yet another character.

Peace to all.

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