What must be preserved, discarded?

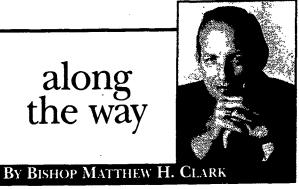
This morning I read an article by Dennis O'Brien, former president of the University of Rochester, in the summer 1997 edition of The Key Reporter, a publication of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. I came in possession of the journal not because I belong to the society but because a friend who knows of my respect and affection for Dennis kindly passed it along to me.

Dennis' article, "The Disappearing Moral Curriculum," compares contemporary educational philosophy with what he describes as the "moral" philosophy that influenced higher education 100 years ago. As you might expect, the earlier philosophy was more Bible centered and self-assured than the philosophy extant today.

For example, O'Brien notes that in 1897 an Eastern college offered the following description for a course in ethics: "The student is conducted through an examination of utilitarianism and other rejected theories to an immutable basis for right in the nature of God." He then notes that the same college's contemporary statement of academic purpose includes as a summary thought, "Human thought is not often capable of reaching universal certitude."

O'Brien gives a number of examples of differences between the two eras. All were interesting and helpful in following his thought. None was more stimulating to me, however, than his opinion that a way of summing up the differences between the two is to contrast education as recovery

along the way



and education as discovery.

The recovery theme bespeaks a study, memorization and reproduction of classic forms. The discovery theme carries with it a sense that we always must work to know the truth, but with the lively realization that we never really grasp it fully.

The article was of interest to me not only because its author is a friend; but also because his method of reflection on the university theme helped me to reflect on parallel themes in my ministry in the church. Very often I find myself trying to sort out or distinguish between what is fundamental and essential for Catholic life and what is not; between those realities that are complete and to be preserved at all costs and those about which we need to learn more; between pastoral practices and ways of thinking that have lasting value and those that once served us well but no longer fill the bill.

That kind of work is not always easy. Indeed, it would be impossible even to

think of doing it without the guidance of the church's living tradition. That tradition allows - I think it even demands - ongoing critical analysis of its self-understanding and pastoral practice if it is to remain a living tradition.

That is not to say that nothing is certain or that fundamental truth changes from age to age. It is merely a healthy reminder that these truths live in the hearts of human beings. And we know all too well how easy it is for us to distort, misunderstand and express poorly even the greatest of gifts. Paul spoke of treasures in earthen

What do you think about this theme? If you could begin married life again, knowing what you know now, would you change in any way how you have been spouse to your husband or wife? If you could return to day one of your priesthood, religious life, teaching career or whatever - knowing what you now know – what might you do in different fashion?

To use Dennis O'Brien's terms: If you could travel the same road again, knowing what you know now, what would you want to recover and what would you like to discover? Think about it.

Peace to all.

P.S. In his article Dennis used the word "palimpsest." I had to look it up. Do you know what it means? Be the first to send me the definition of palimpsest and I will send you a prize.



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