

THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

Second Place Winner

Priest/Deacon

Transformation As Provocation

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, on a summer evening, I went to my town's most popular tavern where some friends were performing music on the patio. Tim and the guys from the band Clocktower cover classic rock and pop, mostly from the 70's & 80's. (My wife convinced them to add Rick Springfield's *Jesse's Girl* to their repertoire; it has been a crowd favorite ever since!) I arrived minutes before the music began and greeted the bartender—a young woman who graduated with one of my sons. She poured me a pint of Dublin's finest stout and I headed for the patio. As I made my way to the back of the crowd a friend entered the area from an outside gate. He greeted me warmly. Minutes later, another middle-aged fellow entered through the same gate. My buddy, Pete, welcomed this guy too, then turned to introduce us: “Brian, meet Joe. Actually, this is *Father Joe*.”

Brian looked surprised and asked, “Where are you a priest—what parish?”

I told him Holy Trinity, on Atterbury. (It's a few blocks from the pub.)

“I know your church!” he exclaimed. “You guys give my kids hot dogs and pony rides on Memorial Day.” (It's true, our parish has had a Memorial Day festival for more than a decade; it's a staple in our town. I should note, too, that the festival was also my wife's doing. She's clever, my girl.) Brian went on to say, “If I went to church I'd go to yours.” Naturally, I asked him why he hasn't come. He

told me plainly, “Because I don’t believe in God.” I agreed that that was a good reason.

I assumed we would then turn our attention to the band, who had just struck up the intro to Tom Petty’s *Free Fallin’*. I was wrong. Brian went on to say, “I’m a physician—a pediatric oncologist—and every day I see children dying of cancer. I refuse to believe in any god who gives kids cancer. Can you explain to me why god allows innocent children to die from horrible diseases?” (A couple caveats here. I use a small case g because the god he was struggling to wrap his mind around is not my God. Second, I later discovered that Brian wasn’t being honest with me; he’s a urologist, not an oncologist. Still, I’m sure the surgical specialty made his point more poignant.)

So there I was, on a summer night, Guinness in hand, with the lyrics, “*she loves Jesus, and America too*” crooning in the background, when I was asked an important question: How can anyone believe in God in the face of jarring evil? It wasn’t phrased like that, but that was the question. And it wasn’t rhetorical, either. I knew that because Brian stopped talking as if to say, “Let’s hear it, preacher; what do you have to say?”

Hudson, Ohio, the community I call home, is peopled with well-educated, affluent families. Our school system ranks among the nation’s best. And while we have many thriving churches, the truth of the matter is, on an average Sunday, fewer than half our population go to church. Kepner’s Tavern, however, welcomes both church goers and non-church goers alike. So, if you want to meet the latter group in Hudson you might try going to Kep’s.

I asked Brian, “Do you really want me to answer your question?” He assured me he did. I offered two approaches, the first from moral reasoning and the second from the necessity of human freedom.

I began, “You say that you will not believe in God because of the problem of evil. But that means you must also believe in goodness too; right?” He nodded. I continued, “If you believe in the categories of good and evil, then you believe that the universe has a moral order. And if the universe has a moral order—a moral law—then there must be a moral law *giver*. We call that law-giver God. If children dying of cancer pangs you as evil, and if tucking your children into bed at night infuses you with the euphoria of goodness, then you believe in moral order—moral laws. Why not believe in the moral law Giver?”

Before he could answer I turned to my next argument. “Second,” I told him, “we need to ask why an all-powerful God would permit evil in the world if he loves humanity. One answer to this dilemma lies in the necessity of freedom. All loving relationships are predicated on freedom. The story in Genesis presents us with just such a scenario. Could God have created puppets that would be enslaved to him? Yes, but they could never *love* God. Love demands freedom. Consequently, the willingness of the Creator to risk human suffering was necessary for a reciprocity of love.”

I watched as Brian listened attentively to my arguments. When I finished, I asked, “What do you think? Can you see how the presence of evil doesn’t only fail to disprove God’s existence, it actually reinforces it?”

He took a minute, then replied, “I’m *not* convinced. But, I will admit these are two possibilities I’ve never heard before. I’m going to think about what you’ve said. We’ll talk again.” Finally we turned our attention to the band.

Similar encounters happen to me regularly in Hudson. It’s not often a philosophy discussion, although those are not atypical either. Usually people tell me they heard something about our parish and what they heard piqued their interest. What they don’t know, however, is that this is our paradigm for mission.

In the following pages I will argue that the plethora of challenges facing the Church lie not so much in its ability to keep its polemics current. Rather, the Church needs to focus its energies on transforming lives through the power of the Gospel as our strongest apologia for the faith. In other words, while we remain grateful for the philosophers and the apologists, the theologians and the academics, the greatest defense of the faith comes—as it always has—from the testimonies of ordinary people whose lives bear witness to God’s transforming grace. Simply put, nothing is more provocative or more convincing than a community of saints.

A COMMUNITY OF SAINTS

In Ephesians 4:12—16, St Paul says the Lord has given gifts to the Church to equip (i.e., prepare, ready, *perfect*) it for the work of the ministry. He uses the word *katartismos*, which carries the sense of improving something or setting a thing in precise working order. His image conveys the notion that ministers in the Church (i.e., apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers) have been given gifts for the specific purpose of *perfecting the laity toward spiritual maturity*. Notice how the concept of spiritual maturation lies at the heart of Paul’s thinking. In these verses he offers eight metaphors for Christian maturation: “for building up the body” (12); “until we all attain” (13); “to mature manhood (*andra teleion*—the perfect man)” (13); “the measure of the stature of the fullness” (13); “no longer...children” (14); “we are to grow up” (15); “the whole body...is equipped” (16); and “the body grow[s] so that it builds itself up” (16). Indeed, the entire *raison d’etre* for spiritual giftedness in ministry thus lies in the perfecting of individual believers so that they might form a single unit ready for mission.

Fulfilling Paul’s design requires a specific imperative for the presbyterate; namely, the commitment to the primacy of spiritual formation. For too long parish

ministry has focused on the metrics of corporate America rather than that of the spiritual fathers. Not surprisingly, the entrepreneurs and market practitioners discover the impulse to champion numeric growth over qualitative development. Many parish priests thus pursue their careers with all the gusto of the *other* white-collar professionals. This has often led the Church to become an organization where ladder climbers and sales professionals can flourish.

Evidence for this metamorphosis is easily found in what we never document. For instance, nowhere do clergy report on the advancement of men and women, boys and girls, in either sanctity or service. No one asks how many people assumed roles of leadership, how many overcame conflict, how many sought a priest for private confession, or how many new lay teachers assumed the mantle. Nowhere do we report spiritual retreats taken by laity, persons delivered from besetting sins, or Bibles read in a calendar year. In short, scant concern is shown regarding the perfecting of the saints, while great attention is paid to that which we can more easily document on a spreadsheet.

Nearly forty years ago Eugene Peterson argued that the Church's clergy had become a company of shopkeepers, enamored with shopkeepers's concerns—"how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that customers will lay out more money."¹ He went on to urge pastors to take a different approach, to look upon their vocation with a different emphasis. Instead of focusing on analytics, he argued, the pastor should aim at the qualitative work of making saints. He used a metaphor from trigonometry—angles in a triangle—to outline this emphasis. The pastor should focus primarily on: prayer, scripture, and spiritual formation.²

¹ Peterson, Eugene H. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987. p.2

² *Ibid.*, p.3

Which acts remain mission-critical in the pastorate? It's not cultural attentiveness or political insight. It's not technological acumen or business savvy. It's not even the pastor's cleverly crafted sermons. The primary task at the center of the presbyterate remains a commitment to prayer, to rightly dividing the Word of truth, and to leading parishioners into a deeper relationship with the Lord. This ministry, when carried out faithfully over a sustained period of time, will develop saints—people transformed into the image of Christ ready to bring the Gospel to a needy world.

An essential requisite for the mission of the Church and its defense of the faith thus lies with the presbyteral vocation. A priest is called to form saints ready to engage society. The Ordinal's historic exhortation makes this clear. The bishop charges the ordinand(s) to:

“Work diligently, with your whole heart, to bring those in your care into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of God, and to maturity in Christ, that there may be among you neither error in religion nor immorality in life. Finally, equip and lead your Congregation to proclaim tirelessly the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”³

It is only when the baptized move on to spiritual maturity that they will be equipped to navigate the contours of a hostile, unbelieving world.

A PROVOCATIVE CHURCH

It does not follow from this premise, however, that local parishes should become insular, parochial communities focused entirely on their members. The

³ 2019 *Book of Common Prayer*. Anglican Liturgy Press: Huntington Beach, CA, 2019. p.489

history of the Church has always been one that sought to engage unbelievers while simultaneously forming the baptized. In other words, the Church has always maintained its mission of both making saints *and* converts.

Nowhere was this dual focus more plain than in the earliest forms of the eucharistic service. As the mass became public, the unbaptized were invited to observe the first half of the liturgy—to listen to the Scriptures, the sermon, and the prayers—but were summarily dismissed for the Communion.⁴ Indeed, the conversion of one of history’s greatest saints, Augustine of Hippo, began with just such an encounter.

Augustine writes in *Confessions* about his time as a rhetoric teacher in Milan. There he heard about the local bishop’s deft oratory skill. Curious to evaluate Ambrose’s homiletic mastery, Augustine went to hear him preach. He wrote, “I was not anxious to learn *what* he said, but merely to *how* he said it...yet at the same time with the words...there also entered into my mind the things themselves” (emphasis added).⁵ Augustine went to mass to evaluate a rhetorician but was surprised by grace.

In our world not many unbelievers will go to a parish church to hear a polished orator, though some will. Many people will, however, come for a festival or a party. People will also come because they heard about a parish’s care for a needy family. People will come because they heard about a church’s goodness and generosity, its kindness and compassion, its contagious joy and pure love. People will come when they learn how marriages were saved and how addicts found deliverance. In most cases, the provocation of goodness precedes the announcement of God’s kingdom.

⁴ Dix, Dom Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. Continuum: London, 1945. p.38

⁵ Augustine of Hippo; translated by Ryan, John K. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960. pp.130f.

In his first letter, St Peter wrote to early Christians, imploring them to, “honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”⁶ Unfortunately, the part that has often been overlooked in Peter’s admonition lies in the *necessity* of a question asked. The Church needs to first provoke the culture with its goodness so that people will want to know the source of our hope. Graham Tomlin writes, “[T]he first stage in a church’s approach to its non-Christian neighbors may not be in wondering how we can persuade them that [the Gospel] is true but by asking how we can make them want to know more.”⁷ Our verbal apologia for the Christian religion, therefore, should not begin until we’ve been asked a question, lest we spoil the most important ingredient in the human quest for learning, curiosity.

CONCLUSION

My conversation with Brian at Kepner’s Tavern did not begin when Pete introduced us, it began when Abby Boysel suggested to the vestry that we should have a festival on Memorial Day. Likewise, our conversation took place because Lisa handed out popcorn with a smile and because Richmond (nattily attired in seersucker slacks and pressed, white shirt!) twirled cotton candy like a seasoned carnie. It happened because Diane gently led a pony around the lawn and stayed until every child got at least two rides. In short, the conversation on Kepner’s patio between a physician and a clergyman about the thorny problem of theodicy happened because saints did what saints do, they exhibited the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

⁶1 Peter 3:15 ESV

⁷ Tomlin, Graham. *The Provocative Church*. Forward Movement: Cincinnati, 2015. p.12

If Anglicans want to reach the world with the Gospel we need to be a community of godly men and women who proclaim with our lives what we're for, not just what we're against. We need to demonstrate how to live truly good lives, truly human lives.⁸ This will not only provoke our neighbors, it will stun them. When people are faced with otherwise inexplicably beautiful behavior they will want to know more. Then, *when they ask*, we will be ready to tell them about our hope.

⁸ Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. Harper Collins: San Francisco, 2006. p.222, 237