

CHALLENGING THE FUTURE OF CORPUS



Joseph Sankovich was ordained in 1970 for the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, transferred to the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1971 and was voluntarily laicized in 1976. His career path then took him to the Catholic cemetery apostolate where he established a consulting practice in 1990 and met diocesan and parish cemetery needs in more than 40 North American (arch)dioceses. He has published "The ToolBox for Parish Cemeteries, Diocesan Cemetery Program: Director Handbook", and currently edits, publishes and distributes The Parish Cemetery Newsletter to more than 5,000 parishes in the United States. A more complete biography and information about the cemetery apostolate can be found at www.sankovich.com

I am blest to have encountered Nick del los Reyes at my parish in Tucson, Arizona. We typically connect at the Tuesday morning Mass and sometimes share breakfast afterward. Because Nick is currently in CORPUS leadership, and we share resigned priest status, although differ in sexual orientation, our conversations not only speak to personal matters but also to the broader Catholic challenges of our day.

Nick has spoken of the long history of CORPUS and its initial assemblies to gift resigned priests and their spouses/families with a common community and enhance your abilities to work toward a wider acceptance of married priests in the Catholic Latin Rite. Alas, however, those of us who left active ministry in the 1960s through the 1970s are now much older and many have gone forward to their eternal reward. I recently reviewed the list of deceased members and found joy in reading life accomplishments of some of my friends and associates, especially Ed Hastings. Ed was the pastor of St. Charles Borromeo in Detroit and invited me to experience diaconate under his guidance. He and his spouse departed for California during my deacon year.

I'm inclined to share an old observation offered by a Philadelphia priest/religion teacher from my high school years: for Catholic hierarchical leadership death solves all problems! And I'm afraid that is the quiet and desolate grave where the discussion on a married priesthood seems to be headed. In that connection, from the thoughts I shared with Nick, he suggested

that I put them down on paper and share them with the CORPUS anawim, perhaps as an acknowledgment of current realities and a framework for a path forward.

TRANSITIONING

I departed active (arch)diocesan ministry in 1975, not to marry, but rather to resolve a personal conflict with celibacy/chastity. Unfortunately, as a somewhat late bloomer, I was coming to grips with my sexual orientation and could not at that time square that with my understanding of the obligations of priesthood. I was provided with a priest to handle my paperwork, and despite his observation that he saw no reason for me to leave active ministry, I spelled out my request in detail in my petition for laicization. My petition went to Rome in January 1976 and was returned for my signature within 3 months, just before Easter. I had a well-placed friend in Rome.

Over the past two years, now at age 75, I've worked on an autobiography and have found it quite helpful in facilitating a deeper understanding of my emotional and spiritual journeys throughout these past 50 years. The tome, titled *Ego Eimi*, is now in final editing. It captures my early years, from about 3 to 17, and with decades of talk therapy I am now able to make use of Attachment Theory to understand a host of issues related to the impact of The Great Depression and World War II – worthy of another article!

An Opinion Piece

When coming to grips with my psychosexual identity in my 4th year of active ministry, I didn't take steps to plan for my exit and move into a new and completely different career. Willfully, armed with a college degree in philosophy, and an advanced degree in New Testament theology, I jumped without looking. The safety net I had, however, was the cemetery in the parish from which I left. The new pastor suggested that I continue with my administrative responsibilities, and I was fortunate to find a college admissions position which allowed for that possibility.

A NEW APOSTOLATE

I expanded my cemetery responsibilities to include digging graves, cutting grass, plowing snow, and selling graves and memorialization. Not only was the combined income sufficient to restore me to a comfortable lifestyle, the cemetery involvement was an incentive to seek a career within this apostolate. During this time frame I came across an ad in the National Catholic Reporter for transition assistance and traveled to New York City for several appointments that pointed me to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and her work with grief/bereavement. I participated in two very different California workshops with her and her team, began the process of draining the pool of my repressed grief, and through a half-dozen psychodramas became much more aware of the impact of childhood trauma and began to understand my need for acceptance as well as self-forgiveness.

Out of these experiences I crafted a 40 year consulting career in Catholic cemeteries, first working for another consultant, then accepting a position as director of cemeteries in the Archdiocese of Seattle, and finally establishing my own practice. Throughout my career I've collaborated with 40 North American (arch)dioceses, been graced by my interactions with John Cardinal Dearden, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, Bishops Ken Untener and David O'Connell. Who could be more blest?

Breaking into and maintaining my involvement was not easy and continues to be quite the challenge. My very first Catholic Cemetery Conference convention, where I was invited to speak of the need for Catholic cemeteries to introduce bereavement programs, was a startling wake up. Two major priest figures in the Conference, in cross-talk at board dinner before the opening of the meeting, allowed as how "ex-priests would be better off if they would never have been born, and if that were not the available solution, then should have millstones tied to their necks and fall off the face of the earth.!"

A RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

I found a much more receptive audience in the Diocesan Fiscal Managers Conference, and thru that venue, despite continuous tortuous interference from the leadership of the CCC, introduced a post-Vatican II Catholic cemetery mission statement, founded Catholic Cemeteries of the West, tackled the Pandora's Box of parish cemeteries by compiling six manuals into The ToolBox for Parish Cemeteries, initiated a Newsletter for Parish Cemeteries, and have just released Diocesan Cemetery Programs: A Supervisor's Handbook. While it's never been easy, I view my career as a shift in vocational focus, and my contributions significant to the Catholic church in the United States.

To prepare for the intended focus of this article Nick suggested that I search out AnthonyPadovano's *Broken Promises*. I did that and now more fully understand the shame that these Catholic Cemetery Conference priests, and other conference leaders encouraged by them, have attempted to inflict on me. While it has been hurtful, especially being identified as a wolf in sheep's clothing, I've both survived and thrived. My career and work have been recognized and validated by a half-dozen editions of *Who's Who*; *The ToolBox* has been certified for best practices by The Leadership Roundtable, and I'm able to enjoy semi-retirement as an expert in my field.

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CAVEAT

How many of us, perhaps because of our religious education and priestly training, might be of the opinion that religion occupies the key leadership role in the evolution of society? How often have we read religious leaders, especially (arch)bishops proclaim that today's problems are the result of secular humanism run rampant? Without questioning that premise, we've been taught to totally buy in to what's being offered by hierarchical leadership without question or dispute; and if we might dare to question, we are immediately told that we are guilty of the sin of pride.

How about we take a more realistic look at the role of secular humanism in the evolution of our world and many of the practices that secular/humanist energy has caused to cease. We could offer a litany, but let's start with burning heretics or witches and continue on to the mandatory stoning of female adulterers; the list must certainly include the persecution of Copernicus and Galileo. Consequently, within this context, what follows is just one more attempt to recognize, acknowledge, and make use of the science found in the secular humanism venue and cause it to be forcefully applied to human sexual morality in a way that is consonant with logic and empirical evidence.

And in doing so, can we attach some urgency to our undertaking? After all, we only live one life, and we should be able to live it to the fullest, unencumbered by religious mythology that will never again attract the educated, experienced and informed.

With my autobiography finished, I'm able to spend some time on these bigger issues, both political and religious. In both my family and work I continue to see responses to the intransigence of the Catholic hierarchy as over reactions, i.e. throwing the baby out with the bath water. And this gives me great concern as my Catholic faith is quite important to me, especially as I now have to face mortality in a more up-front fashion.

SHIFTING FOCUS

How often do we hear I'm spiritual but not religious? When talking to family or friends how often do we hear abandonment of the Catholic church, disgust with hierarchical leadership, frustration with failure to address the pre-Vatican II issues (especially sex and guilt) that, if confronted in a healthy and comprehensive way, might result in once again filling the pews? And how can we not recognize that foundational is an updating of Catholic teaching about human sexuality?

My 80 year old friend Mary Pat told the story a couple of weeks ago at dinner after Mass of her introduction to life in a co-educational Catholic college. On the very first day, all the Freshmen women were assembled in an theater-style classroom. When a priest entered after they were all settled, he asked them to cross their legs, placing one knee over the other. Once they did that, he then announced, You've now closed the gates to hell. Keep them that way! I cite this example to simply illustrate the long-term damage with which we are dealing and a possible approach that CORPUS could undertake to broaden its mission. While I accept the premise that both a married and inclusive priesthood could solve a number of current Catholic church problems, I believe both vision and solutions need to be broader and deeper. I firmly believe and advocate for a comprehensive reexamination of Catholic understanding and teaching on matters of human sexuality.

I decided to float this thought to my Saturday evening after Mass dinner group, and did some quick research to prepare myself. I went to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* to search for a current definition of virgin/virginity. Much to my surprise I only found two entries, one dealing with the Virgin Mary, the other dealing with the Virgin Birth. So, I dug deeper and went to the document's treatment on The Sixth Commandment.

An Opinion Piece

Armed with what I found, I asked my assembled friends to define virginity, letting them know that they could differentiate between virginity for males/females. Then I asked them if they knew what fecundity is. Even with the entire group being college educated, none of them did. And so our table discussion unfolded and continued, once I supplied the definition, to everything from masturbation to celibacy, homosexuality, pre-marital sexual expression, transsexual identity, in-vitro fertilization, pedophilia and a host of other related topics too numerous to recount.

THE CHALLENGE

This brings me to my premise/question. If those in leadership in the Catholic church were to seriously examine all the research into human sexuality that has been assembled over the past 80 years (and this is where most of the work has been done), and develop a morality that is consonant with this biological, psychological and sociological research, could this impact the future of the Catholic church in a way that we would hear less of I'm spiritual but not religious and rather more of younger voices raised in joyful song at weekly celebrations of Eucharist?

ROLE FOR CORPUS

You might ask, Why should CORPUS become involved in this question? I would submit that the members of CORPUS already are involved and have plenty of important data to share. While we will not see significant changes in the immediate future, any exploration or journey starts with first steps.

My thinking revolves around a few basic premises:

The Second Vatican Council, in its writing on marriage, cracked open the door when teaching that the purposes of sacramental marriage were two-fold, i.e. the acceptance of any children that came from the union, and the mutual support of the spouses one for the other.

Priesthood currently suffers an identity problem both within and outside the believing and practicing Catholic church membership. How many of us look at and listen to today's presider at liturgy and wonder, is he psychosexually healthy, does he have a secret partner of either sex, how faithful to celibacy is he, might he be a pedophile?

Today dioceses and parishes are flooded with foreign-born priests who are called to the United States to assist with our priest shortage. How many of us sit in pews and either cannot understand what they are preaching or hear an extremely narrow and conservative understanding of the Catholic church and its teachings that make no sense in our reality?

The current buzzword is *clericalism* and much of today's issues are placed at that doorstep. Sure, clericalism is a problem; so is pedophilia and a host of other issues. But, in reality, aren't these are second or third floor issues that leadership is attempting to address without a solid and strong foundation in a contemporary examination of all facets of human sexuality?

I firmly believe that a huge reserve of personal integrity resides within the community of priests who voluntarily resigned from active ministry. I'd like to test that belief. Among those with whom I associate I see both integrity and generosity in abundance. I cannot help but believe that this integrity is grown through significant life decisions and changes, mirrored when discovered among friends and associates. This affords an incredible teaching opportunity with a much larger audience.

If nothing else, *Inside the Closet of the Vatican*, tells us that the old chestnut do as I say and not as I do is alive and well and has found a secure home within Catholic ordained leadership. While I recognize and support the understanding that rules/disciplines can change in a downward dynamic from on high or from disobedience from the grassroots, what is described in this book does not in any way appear as an effort to impact current disciplines.

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INITIAL STEPS

All of this having been said, my purpose is not only to share a personal journey, but to invite CORPUS leaders and membership additionally to refine and move forward with the following:

- Collaborate with recognized Catholic research organizations to assemble and publish data on voluntarily resigned priests with focus on human sexual maturity, integrity, and their new careers with underpinning ministerial service.

- Institute convocation informs us that they have reached out to and affiliated with at least 27 like-minded conservative/status quo organizations. There needs to be a major challenge to this organization and its impact.

Further engage the CORPUS community on thoughts and experiences, from childhood forward, of psychosexual development and the challenges associated therewith.

- Seriously consider the autobiography approach to both documenting journeys from ministerial priesthood, detailing dynamics and steps leading to decisions to transition, and further documenting growth in personal integrity and associated motivations.

- Float the concern of updating understanding and teaching of human sexuality among the associated organizations with which CORPUS is affiliated to ascertain the possibility of joining forces in this quest.

- Make use of the autobiographical experience to document the predominant ways in which ministerial service have taken place or been exercised in your journey following the decision to depart active priestly service.

CONCLUSION

Finally, my evolved theologies on prayer and Eucharist motivate me to articulate and invite those of you who still participate in Catholic communal Eucharist to consider the following:

- I am not a believer in traditional teachings and practices of prayer of petition, but strongly believe in the collection of psychological energy toward a particular effort or concern can grow Catholic morality into the 21st Century? This would be a burst of significant energy that could help to motivate ourselves and others toward this end.

- Under the concept of a priest forever do we believe that when we participate in the celebration of Eucharist we are present as con-celebrants? And, if that is the case, is it shame/guilt that might prevent our extending our hand to accompany the celebrant in consecration? If this has not been addressed, explored, discussed in depth in prior years, could that be done, or if it has, can it be resurrected and updated?

- I hope to recognize and celebrate the personal integrity that motivated the majority of us to shift from active priestly service to the lives we now live, the careers we've chosen, the joys and sorrows of our shared lives.

- I'm convinced that we have lessons to teach about psychosexual development and the lived reality of healthy sexual expression. This is especially true in these days of sexual scandal among the ordained Catholic clergy.

- If we can at least convince a significant number in leadership positions that this is the necessary foundation upon which human sexuality and the issues associated therewith can be recognized and properly addressed, then we will have been able to help construct the foundation upon which real solutions and growth are possible.

And what a gift that might be!!