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Cultivating the Capacity for the Moral Imagination: Developing a Constructive Postmodern Theological Curriculum in Higher Education

Abstract

Graduate students in ministry and religious education often discuss how challenging it is, in their ministries and in their personal lives, to engage with people who espouse an ideological worldview deeply different from their own. This study explores how religious educators in higher education can nurture the capacity for what John Paul Lederach calls the moral imagination and embrace Pope Francis call for synodality by developing a constructive postmodern theological curriculum and teaching strategies that encourage dialogue across ideological difference.

Keywords

Moral imagination, ideology, curriculum, religious education, National Dialogue, synodality

Introduction

Many of my graduate students, most of whom are Catholic religious educators and ministers, talk about how challenging it is, in their ministries and in their personal lives, to engage people who espouse deeply different ideological worldviews. There is a seeming divide between conservative/traditional or progressive/liberal religious ideologies that prevents some Catholics from engaging in and sustaining dialogue across ideological difference. I have heard and seen people, my students and colleagues in academia included, differentiate between two polarizing and conflictual ideologies by using phrases such as, “are you a Pope John Paul II/ Benedict Catholic or a Pope Francis Catholic?” In the exhibit hall at the National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry (NCCYM), for example, one exhibitor displayed cardboard cut outs of all three popes and as the day progressed I saw several people physically move the life-size cardboard Pope Francis out of the picture before taking selfies with the popes.

Given Pope Francis media [popularity](#) for his pastoral presence, in both his words and actions, through his embodiment of the Gospel values of mercy, love and compassion¹ (his handling of the clergy abuse [scandal](#) notwithstanding), it is a wonder why people would move aside a cardboard picture of him to take a selfie without his image, to say the least. Yet, there are Catholics that take deep issue with the Pope’s discussions on synodality. In fact, this might just be one of the most dominant public issues dividing Catholics along the traditional –progressive ecclesiological divide.

In his speech for 50th Anniversary of Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis reimagined into life what the term synodality meant, and in doing so redefined the purpose of the synod of

¹ Robert Draper, “Will the Pope Change the Vatican? Or Will the Vatican Change the Pope?” *National Geographic Magazine*, (August 2015), retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2015/08/pope-francis-vatican-roman-catholic-reformation/>

bishops. Synodality, for Francis no longer refers to episcopal collegiality, rather “a synodal church” according to Francis:

is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing.” It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (*Jn* 14:17), in order to know what he [*sic*] “says to the Churches” (*Rev* 2:7).²

Redefining synodality from the reciprocal relationship held between bishops and the pope, to include their relationship to the whole church— the people of God— has brought about staunch opposition by some to Francis’s Papacy.³ Ironically enough, his theology of synodality created a contentious debate about the ecclesial nature of the church, contributing this ideological division in the church, and as such, has become a barrier to unity.

Religious and moral ideological differences often enter our class discussions—usually but not always in fruitful ways. Differences include how to effectively pass on the faith to young people or what it means to be Catholic. Aside from navigating ideologically polarizing conversations with my students, I, myself have been in professional situations where I fundamentally disagree with a person’s religious ideology as it relates to religious education, theology, and ministry. Such encounters have occurred in meetings with the National Leadership Network (NLN) at the [National Dialogue](#) (ND), a collaborative initiative aimed at unifying Catholic youth and young adult ministry leaders and organization to understand more fully the lived experience young people and reengage them in the life of the church.

The NLN developed a conversation guide⁴ to engage or re-engage not only young people, the but also the ministry leaders and the parents/guardians of young people through a facilitated dialogue.⁵ We realized that if we are to unify and mobilize pastoral leaders and religious educators, then we ourselves first need to encounter one another through meaningful dialogue, so we broke up in to small groups of 7-8 and piloted the first round of facilitated conversations. Months later, I replicated this listening process with a group of religious educators, parents, ministers, and stakeholders at one of the Archdiocesan high schools in New Orleans. Through this process, which is the focus of this essay, I saw ministry leaders and parents, when given a safe hospitable space to express themselves, enter into and/or create more meaningful

² Francis, “Speech on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015: *Origins* 45/22 (October 29, 2015) 382-383.

³ One such critique comes from a series by Xavier Rynne II [pseud] published in *First Things* documenting the Synod on Young People (note this article inaccurately refers to this as a Synod on “Youth”). For one such example, see Xavier Rynne II [pseud], ed. “Letters From the Synod-2018: #19,” *First Things*, (October 29, 2018) retrieved from <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/10/letters-from-the-synod-2018-19>

⁴ The V National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry developed a similar and more comprehensive approach to encountering one another through facilitated listening sessions and dialogues; however, my primary experiences come from the NLN in the National Dialogue, therefore this essay draws from the ND’s method of engagement.

⁵ At the writing of this essay, the work of the National Dialogue refers these sessions conversations and/or dialogues; however, these are actually facilitated listening sessions designed to hear more about the experiences of young people, their parents, and ministry leaders regarding their relationship and experiences with their faith and the church. The NLN is currently in conversation about this language.

relationships with one another, remain open or “stay curious,”⁶ and take risks in sharing their experiences.

Engaging in such a process of transformative listening from across ideological differences is strikingly similar to John Paul Lederach’s four disciplines that “form the moral imagination that make peacebuilding possible: . . .relationship, paradoxical curiosity, creativity, and risk.”⁷ In his work with international peacebuilding, Lederach observes that skill building and mediation can only do so much; there must be a moment that changes how we view conflict, “a turning point that orients us toward a new and more humane horizon” (23). Such turning points come when individuals cultivate a capacity for a moral imagination. My experiences with the National Dialogue process brought many of us to such a turning point in how we understand one another and our differences.

My reflections on the National Dialogue and peacebuilding raise questions for me about how religious educators can help students practice and model dialogue across difference to more fully understand and value the voices of the other and embrace Pope Francis’ call for a synodal church. As I reflect on my praxis, I wonder: how do these experiences and reflections inform my praxis? How can I bring my experiences in building unity amidst ideological difference to my curriculum? What concrete curriculum themes and pedagogic⁸ practices might religious educators draw from to foster dialogue across deep religious difference in ministry programs in higher education as a way of enacting synodality?

By cultivating a moral imagination, I argue that Catholics can bridge the traditional-progressive ecclesial ideology to become a more synodal church. This paper uses the method of practical theology to explore how my experience developing a moral imagination with the NLN can help religious educators explore their own deeply held assumptions to reexamine the art and practice of teaching across difference. This paper begins with a brief history of synodality as it contributes to an ideological divide in the Catholic Church then unpacks the process of engaging in the National Dialogue from the framework of Lederach’s moral imagination. Finally, I explore how religious educators might embrace constructive postmodern theological curriculum, rooted in process, to envision teaching and learning that cultivates the capacity for a moral imagination and models synodality by fostering unity across deep religious ideological differences with students in ministry and higher education.

What’s in a Name? Synodality under Pope Francis

Theologian Massimo Faggioli argues that “synodality is the most important institutional reform of Francis’s pontificate.”⁹ In tracing the shifts in ecclesial ideology since the Second

⁶ The facilitator guide encourages facilitators and dialogue partners to “focus on accompaniment, be empathetic, and stay curious.” See the *National Dialogue Conversation Facilitator Guide*, 2018, 6. <https://www.nationaldialogue.info/comprehensive-reference>, retrieved 30 April, 2019.

⁷ John Paul Lederach. *The Moral Imagination: The art and soul of building peace*, (Oxford UP: Oxford. 2005), 36

⁸ Andragogy is the accurate term for teaching and learning in adult education, however many of my students teach children or teenagers (pedagogy). I will use the term pedagogy to eliminate the awkwardness of using both terms.

⁹ Massimo Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality: Pope Francis’s Post-Vatican II Reform,” *Commonweal*, (November 23, 2018), retrieved from <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/collegiality-synodality>.

Vatican Council, he notes how ideologically polarized the Catholic church has become. Faggioli states:

In just a few years, the papacy went from a defense of Vatican II as a “a sure compass to guide the course of Peter’s barque” (John Paul II’s words), through a period under Benedict in which Rome indulged traditionalist dissent from Vatican II, to the current pope’s embrace of post–Vatican II synodality. Francis’s emphasis on synodality bridges the gap between his Vatican II theological culture and the new horizon of post-conciliar global Catholicism. It is a bridge that he cannot cross alone.¹⁰

The term Synod reached its fullest expression when Pope Paul VI established the first Synod of Bishops in 1965. In 2015, Pope Francis issued his "*Episcopalis Communio*" where he recalled how Pope Paul VI responded to the need for “episcopal collegiality,” among the bishops and the Pope, by “institute[ing] a body known as the Synod of Bishops.”¹¹ Tracing the history and importance of the Synod since its inception, Francis states:

...Since the beginning of my Petrine ministry, I have paid special attention to the Synod of Bishops, confident that it can experience “further development so as to do even more to promote dialogue and cooperation among Bishops themselves and between them and the Bishop of Rome”. Underpinning this work of renewal must be the firm conviction that all Bishops are appointed for the service of the holy People of God, to whom they themselves belong through the sacrament of Baptism.”¹²

Here, and through his theological commission on the theology of synodality,¹³ Pope Francis redefined synodality from encompassing the consultative and collaborative fruits borne from the Synod of Bishops and the Pope, to include more direct consultation from the lay faithful highlighting the importance of the communion between local and universal church. In an interview with the Belgian Catholic weekly newspaper *Tertio* on the Synod on the Family and the papal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis states:

Either you have a pyramidal church where everything Peter says is done or you have a synodal church where Peter is Peter, but he accompanies the church, lets it grow, listens. What is more, he learns from this reality and sees how to harmonize it...¹⁴

It is precisely this language of learning from the whole People of God that made some people fear the Pope is opening the Catholic Church to up to become a democracy, albeit from the perspective of politics in the United States.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Constitution, Episcopalis Communio*, (Rome, Sept. 18, 2018) §2, retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html

¹² Ibid., §5.

¹³ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life of the Church (Rome, March 3, 2018), retrieved September 12, 2018. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

¹⁴ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “On File,” *Origins*, 46, no. 29 (December 15, 2016), 464.

Pope Francis, through the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, continued to modeled this understanding synodality as he invited young people for the first time in the history of the church to prepare the *Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting* after their meeting in Rome in March 2018. This means the voices lay young adults became a part of the official teaching body of the church.¹⁵ Paul Jarzembowski, who works for the USCCB in the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth recalls how this was likely the first time in the history of synods “when young people without position were given opportunity to address the full synod of bishops.”¹⁶ This is a watershed moment for anyone working in youth and young adult ministry in the Catholic Church.

Francis also expanded on the theme of synodality in his post-synodal exhortation, *Christus Vivit* (CV), in a way not previously written about in the pre-synodal or final documents leading up to CV. This too caught the attention of critics.¹⁷ Francis specifically states that “youth [and young adult] ministry has to be synodal...”¹⁸ He continues:

It should involve a “journeying together” that values “the charisms that the Spirit bestows in accordance with the vocation and role of each of the Church’s members, through a process of co-responsibility... Motivated by this spirit, we can move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, one capable of appreciating its own rich variety, gratefully accepting the contributions of the lay faithful, including young people and women, consecrated persons, as well as groups, associations and movements. No one should be excluded or exclude themselves

In this way, by learning from one another, we can better reflect that wonderful multi-faceted reality that Christ’s Church is meant to be. She will be able to attract young people, for her unity is not monolithic, but rather a network of varied gifts that the Spirit ceaselessly pours out upon her, renewing her and lifting her up from her poverty.¹⁹

The Synod on Young People and the Post-Synodal Exhortation invite ministry leaders and religious educators to reimagine church with and for young people. Business as usual can no longer works.

Unfortunately, the ideological divide over Pope Francis’ use of the term synodality is overshadowing this profound moment in the church and preventing people from receiving the Pope’s Exhortation, and with it, the voices of young people who so desperately need to be heard.²⁰ My colleagues in the field of youth and young adult ministry and religious education, particularly through my collaboration with the NLN of the National Dialogue and the USCCB

¹⁵ See for example *Christus Vivit* §33, §43, and §133

¹⁶ This came from a discussion between Paul and I regarding his research on the history of the Synods in September 2019. The 2014-2015 Synod on the Family likewise invited the voices of lay Catholics from around the world in the process leading up to the synod, but those invited to address the full synod of bishops were primarily from academic institutions or other ecclesial organizations.

¹⁷ See LifeSiteNews as one example: <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/vatican-youth-synod-final-doc-approved.-the-most-controversial-points>

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: Christ is Alive*, Rome (March 25, 2019), § 206.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §206-207.

²⁰ I recognize that there are a likely many other reasons why certain groups do not support Pope Francis’ papacy, however, this issue of synodality seems to have taken deep root and, as such, is hindering efforts to engage youth and young adults falling way from or leaving the church.

National Advisory Team for Young Adult Ministry (NATYAM) were anxiously awaiting a papal exhortation on young people. For the first time in the history of synods and exhortations, we would have in the teaching body of the church, a papal document addressing the needs of Catholic youth and young adults. However, the heartbreak that my colleagues and I currently feel is over the reception of Pope Francis post-synodal exhortation *Christus Vivit: Christ is Alive!*

At the time of writing this essay, the vast majority of Catholic leaders in the United States, from Bishops, diocesan staff, and lay ecclesial ministers and religious educators in catholic secondary schools have not read the document. While many are familiar with the 2018 Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, they are largely unfamiliar with what Pope Francis is asking of the church in *Christus Vivit (CV)*.²¹ This reception, according to some members of my NATYAM, familiar with the arguments criticizing of CV, is due to Pope Francis' ecclesiology, more specifically his theology of synodality.

If Pope Francis issued statements redefining the Catholic priesthood, opening it up to marriage and women, I could certainly anticipate a large vocal backlash in the United States and other parts of the world. But Pope Francis is redefining synodality in light of the teachings from Vatican II, specifically *Lumen Gentiun*. He states as much in his speech to the Synod of Bishops²² in his numerous interviews. His discussion of synodality is not new theology, it is rooted in the Church Teaching of Vatican II.²³

The irony here is that Pope Francis' efforts to redefine synodality as an all-call for unity in the Church have caused a division from some factions within the church, leading these Catholics to oppose his papacy (arguably the same Catholics who believe it is anathema to criticize or question previous popes). What does this mean for my praxis, and for other religious educators in higher education? My students, many of whom are youth and young adult ministers, or lay ecclesial ministers who both indirectly and directly serve young adults through their programs, are called to re-envision a ministry with youth and young adults "synodally." However, some of these same students oppose Pope Francis ecclesiology on synodality. The next section explores, how religious educators can engage ideological differences in graduate programs in ministry and religious education to not only encourage more fruitful outcomes, but model the type of unity Pope Francis asks of us in his treatment of synodality.

Lederach's Moral Imagination and The National Dialogue

The Power of the Moral Imagination

John Paul Lederach, in his *The Moral Imagination: The art and soul of building peace*, articulates and enacts successfully a vision for peacebuilding through the art and practice of dialogue and imagination. Lederach, in tracing the literature on the topic, finds moral imagination accomplishes three important things. First it "develops the capacity to perceive things beyond and at a deeper level than what initially meets the eye... more than immediately available...Second...the authors landed on the term *imagination* in order to emphasize the

²¹ This information comes to me from conference calls with members from staff members with the USCCB and an unpublished survey about *Christus Vivit* from The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), in September 2018.

²² Francis, "Speech on the 50th Anniversary."

²³ International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life," § 2.

necessity of the creative act” most notably through artistic expression.²⁴ “Third...the moral imagination has a quality of transcendence. It breaks out of what appear to be narrow, shortsighted, or structurally determined dead-ends.”²⁵

In my experience, deeply divisive conversations seldom bridge a new horizon of meaning through rational discourse. On the other hand, as Lederach states:

The moral imagination arises with the capacity to imagine ourselves in relationship, the willingness to embrace complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity, the belief in the creative act, and acceptance of the inherent risk required to bring violence into venture unknown paths that build constructive change.²⁶

These are the first steps towards peacebuilding, and I would argue, offer religious educators way of engaging in dialogue across polarizing difference. In looking back on my experience with the ND, I can see these key skills for cultivating the capacity for moral imagination were implicitly present. And the results, as they currently unfold, attest to the success of these initiatives.

The National Dialogue

At the USCCB Convocation of Catholic Leaders, held in July 1-4, 2017 in Orlando, Florida, the NLN kicked-off the first gathering of The National Dialogue in anticipation of the style of dialogue Pope Francis sought to advance when he first announced his plans to hold a Synod on Young People in 2016. From this initial gathering, the NLN invited a diverse array of ministry leaders from around the United states, including academics who teach in ministry and religious education programs to gather at certain times in the year to move this work forward. This was, in many ways, a grassroots effort by organizations, dioceses, parishes, secondary schools, lay apostolates, and colleges and universities to first unify the field of youth and young adult ministry, then mobilize, or, as Tom East called it, “do the dialogue.” Through this unification process, I and others, entered into new relationships with people I never imagined would happen; people who think very differently than I do regarding ministry with youth young adults and education. Through my reflections on these relationships, I uncovered Lederach’s first discipline that forms the moral imagination: “the centrality of relationships,” as it was through our growing relationships that I became far more aware of our similarities than our differences.²⁷

Responding to the signs of the times, that so many young people are leaving the church, and the forthcoming Synod on Young people, the ND gatherings sought to provide ministry leaders and religious educators with tools to help reach out to youth, young adults, their parents, and other ministry leaders. From these initial brainstorming sessions, the NLN developed a website and created resources on how to facilitate listening sessions with each of the above mentioned groups.

In first efforts to unify the field and practice the style of dialogue we developed, we convened a one-day retreat for our ND session April 11-13, 2018 in Newark, NJ. Amidst much prayer and discernment, I was honored to facilitate one of the small group sessions. Many in the

²⁴John Paul Lederach. *The Moral Imagination: The art and soul of building peace*, (Oxford UP: Oxford, 2005), 26-27.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 29.

²⁷ Ibid., 34

room had starkly different approaches to ministry, including ideological differences regarding Pope Francis. Some advocate for a back-to-basics approach to ministry, others believe in preaching the gospel unapologetically to all those they meet, others believed in passing on the faith through religious instruction, or knowledge of doctrine, while others believed more in the accompaniment model of journeying with youth and young adults, like Jesus in the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

Amidst these differences in ministry was a suspicion that I, the academic in the room from a Jesuit (read: Liberal) university had little to offer by way of ministry with youth and young adults. This posturing, however, slowly dissipated once we began our “dialogue” because it was through this prayerful retreat process that we engaged creatively in an open-ended session “where the divine and human meet.”²⁸ Our prayerful retreat-style space prompted in us “a predisposition, a kind of attitude and perspective that opens up, even invokes, the spirit and belief that creativity is humanly possible.”²⁹

In our conversations we discussed how so many young people feel wounded by the church, so if we are to engage them in honest open dialogues, we need to “create a space that welcomes the soul.”³⁰ The rules for dialogue are inspired by Parker Palmer’s Circle of Trust[©] among which are the rules “No fixing, saving, advising, no setting each other straight”³¹ Palmer, and the ND guide instruct facilitators and group members to “Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions...[and] when the going gets rough, turn to wonder.”

This process elicited deep, meaningful, personal responses from the group, many of whom were struggling to understand why their own children have left the Catholic Church, feeling their efforts to raise children in the faith had failed. Participates had a “willingness to take a risk” by being open and honest and, “to step into the unknown without any guarantee of success or even safety.”³² This session changed us; it united across our differences for a common cause.

Since then, I facilitated a dialogue with religious educators, parents, ministers, and stakeholders an Archdiocesan high school in New Orleans, in what can be classified as a more ideologically conservative group. The leadership team wanted to engage the local young adult alums of the school so to unify and strengthen the community, so I recommended we “do the dialogue.” I have had more time processing this first dialogue with this group, than the group in Newark, and they remarked how this first session brought us into a deep, meaningful relationships with one another. In our second session, I recalled the overlapping themes that emerged from their first dialogue. From here, the posturing all but stopped and our commitment to youth and young adult ministry united us across our differences.

One final experience that grew from the ND worth noting is the Voice+Vision Summit in July 2019 that took place at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. Academics and practitioners from across ideological difference the heeded Pope Francis call to look past the liberal/conservative divide and “make use of everything that has borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel”³³ Fr. Frank Pivonka, now president of Franciscan University, and Dr. Bob Rice, Professor of Catechetics and principal organizer of the conference,

²⁸ Matthew Fox, qtd in Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 38.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 130.

³¹ Ibid., 115.

³² Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 39.

³³ Francis, *Christus Vivit*, § 205.

took a giant leap— a risk— towards breaking down the ideological silos that divide our churches and schools.³⁴ From this context, I experienced hearing Cardinal Cupich reflect on CV, watching faculty from what are considered “liberal” institutions, myself included, give panel presentations, and witnessed some of the most powerful preaching I have ever encountered by Dr. Timone Davis, from Loyola University, Chicago— all in Steubenville. Upon reflection, we were engaging in another form of moral imagining: paradoxical curiosity. We, the NLN, and the leadership at Franciscan University made conscious efforts to rise above our ideological differences through our collaboration on this Summit, and did so “with an abiding respect for complexity, a refusal to fall prey to the pressures of forced dualistic categories of truth, and an inquisitiveness about what may hold together seemingly contradictory social energies in a greater whole.”³⁵

Through the process of forming relationships, embracing paradoxical curiosity, modeling creativity and risk, the ND cultivated the capacity for Lederach’s moral imagination in a divided church. While Lederach developed his theory of the moral imagination primarily as a means of peacebuilding and mediation for countries divided by war and other forms of violence, the approach is important to note when engaging people across vast ideological differences. Deep ideological difference breeds hatred, as exemplified in the threats Franciscan University received from the group Church Militant, and from hatred grows violence. Cultivating a capacity for moral imagination provides ministry leaders and religious educators with a method that can enliven synodality, to recognize the Church is one and to work alongside God’s people.

If embracing a synodal church “is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God,” then Catholic ministry leaders and religious educators cannot remain a house divided over ecclesial ideology.³⁶ The experience of unity amidst difference through the process of the National Dialogue could not be accomplished through rational discourse, we needed to cultivate a capacity for moral imagination. If religious educators, in heeding the call towards synodality, are to help raise up new leaders in the church, we must recognize how our curriculum and pedagogy implicitly and explicitly model a theology of synodality with moral imagination. When asking people to engage with others another in meaningful dialogue across deep ideological difference, we must first model the moral imagination in the classroom.

Postmodern Curriculum and the Moral Imagination

The Catholic Church is both universal and particular, yet the particular way of expressing one’s faith can overshadow our universality. Our worldview frames who we are, what we believe in, and the way we approach ministry and religious education. Dialogue across difference; therefore, involves emotions and experience; it involves examining our own identity and our deeply held assumptions. Curriculum theorist William Doll describes how the modernist curriculum values and reinforces characteristics of progress, industry, empirical data, uniformity,

³⁴ In Fr. Dave’s opening address he recalled challenges they encountered in hosting this summit, by way of threats from Church Militant and loss of funding, rooted in part by the anger and hostility over Cardinal Cupich’s presence. But the leadership at Franciscan University was resolute in affirming our common commitment to evangelization and ministry with young people over our ideological differences.

³⁵ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 36.

³⁶ Commission, “Synodality in the Life,” §9

and rational objectivity.³⁷ Emotions, experiential learning, and subjectivity in the modern curriculum can be characterized as less valuable, less academic, and therefore inappropriate in academic spaces. Parker Palmer suggests educators work against “an academic culture that distrusts personal truth,” where “objective facts are regarded as pure, while subjective feelings are suspect and sullied.”³⁸ Instead, Palmer proposes educators teach from wholeness, or “an undivided self” to unify and keep intact our integrity and identity.³⁹

According to Patrick Slattery, “curriculum development in the postmodern era demand that we find a way around the hegemonic forces and institutional obstacles that limit our knowledge, reinforce our prejudices, and disconnect us from the global community”⁴⁰ (2013, 36). Drawing insight from Michael O’Malley, Slattery describes the modern prescriptive Euro-American education and curriculum as one that fosters an “ethic of exclusion,” that “the conscious absence of soul from education limits the efficacy of the pedagogical project and actually creates conditions in which social ills— anxiety, racism, poverty, exclusion – flourish.”⁴¹ The implicit curriculum of the modern text works against the theology of synodality and erects an invisible barrier to the four disciplines of the moral imagination.

A constructive postmodern theological curriculum, on the other hand, encourages religious educators to be open to the transformation that comes through process curriculum – to allow ourselves to remain open to learning from our students, from worldviews and ideologies far different from our own, to teach from an “undivided self.” From this paradigm, “curriculum,” according to Doll, “is a process – not of transmitting what is (absolutely) known but of exploring what is un-known; and through exploration students and teachers ‘clear the land’ together, thereby transforming both the land and themselves.”⁴² This method of teaching and learning, one centered on process, involves taking risks, putting aside a prescribed lesson objectives to remain open to the needs of the class by engaging in a process open to “paradoxical creativity” to make “space for the creative act to emerge.”⁴³

Religious educators can develop a postmodern curriculum and pedagogy rooted in process to encourage dialogue across conflictual religious ideologies and worldviews to embrace a moral imagination that helps us “let go of the need for certainty, consensus, and uniformity” so that we may grow “closer to wisdom and justice”⁴⁴ This creates a willingness to risk, to leave what is comfortable (clinging to our differences), to risk what is unknown (finding unity, growing into synodality).⁴⁵

Slattery argues that the postmodern theological text recognizes “diversity, eclecticism, and ecumenism,” which are also hallmarks of Pope Francis theology of synodality, for they “bring us closer to wisdom and justice. One must give everything away to become rich, let go in

³⁷ William E. Doll Jr. *Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum*. (Columbia, NY: Teachers College Press, 1993).

³⁸ Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2007), 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ Patrick Slattery. *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era: 3rd Edition*, (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2013). 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴² Doll, *Post-Modern*, 155.

⁴³ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 38.

⁴⁴ Slattery, *Postmodern Curriculum*, 106, 107.

⁴⁵ See Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 39.

order to live, experience suffering to understand joy.”⁴⁶ This underscores the task of cultivating the moral imagination in higher education.

Students more familiar with the modern curriculum, of prescribed standards and measurable objectives are implicitly taught to see education as a commodity, something to gain or “achieve.” The modern curriculum teaches students that if they “master” a subject or discipline, they will have “succeeded” in their education. This approach to teaching and learning is often devoid of creativity and imagination –something best illuminated by the arts and aesthetics. Our students are a part of the curriculum, therefore knowing what our students bring to the curriculum is the first step in our course design. However, religious educators unfamiliar with postmodern curriculum development may feel uneasy putting off their full syllabus or course design before learning about their students. There is risk involved in the process curriculum which is, in many ways, what Palmer means by having the Courage to Teach.⁴⁷ It also begins the work of modeling the moral imagination.

The next step might be in developing a classroom community through pedagogical practices that create the space for students to form relationships. I have had success in watching students form relationships by first establishing classroom norms using our course material on adult communication skills and Parker’s Circle of Trust,[©] then forming small collaborative discussion groups. I also ask students to work together in pairs to create an opening prayer experience for our weekly sessions. Collaborative projects have the secondary effect of building relationships.

According to Slattery, there are two hallmarks of postmodern curriculum development: “Autobiography and arts-based autoethnography.”⁴⁸ I invite students to engage in an open facilitated listening where we explore the intersectionality of our lives, share our stories. In my efforts to teach through autobiography, I begin by sharing my own story, how I experienced religious education, trace the formative events that shaped my identity, then invite students to do the same using Eric H. F. Law’s Invitation Method.⁴⁹ I also design space through our online learning management system where students can post creative reflections on their course learning, by uploading videos, music, lyrics, poetry or other visual and audio forms of art. I also encourage them to create their own images, poems to open them up to the paradox of possibility and creativity.⁵⁰ They share with one another their own interpretations of art and in doing so disclose more of themselves, forming even stronger and more meaningful relationships with one another. These relationships build the foundation for cultivating a moral imagination that can find unity amidst difference.

Diversity is a gift to be celebrated. Difference should not to be avoided or downplayed, but nor should it divide us. Religious educators are called to enhance their art and practice of teaching and learning by designing a space and practices where students might integrate a

⁴⁶ Slattery, *Postmodern Curriculum*, 107.

⁴⁷ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a Teacher’s life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

⁴⁸ Slattery, *Postmodern Curriculum*, 71. I also draw from Anne Streaty Wimberly’s “story-linking method” with my students from her book *Soul Stories: African American Christian education*.

⁴⁹ See Eric H.F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A spirituality for leadership in a multicultural community*, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993). His method is also reprinted in the Appendix 1 of the USCCB *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*

⁵⁰ I used insights from Lederach’s discussion on Haiku’s from his chapter on aesthetics and social change his *The Moral Imagination*.

reverence for unity amidst seemingly polarizing diverse worldviews. In doing so, we begin to cultivate the moral imagination towards the full realization of a synodal church, where the people of God journey together to create a more just and compassionate world.

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