

A Roman Catholic Spirituality for Spiritual Care Supervision

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Because I do not presume to speak for all Roman Catholics, it is important to name and claim my own social location at the outset. I'm a Midwesterner, born and raised in a German-Catholic farming community of 800 people, where I lived within nature's seasons and the Catholic liturgical year. I also know that my ministry of more than 50 years and my spirituality of even more years has many influences beyond Roman Catholicism. My bicycle spelled freedom and adventure for me years before I got a driver's license. My stamp collection, together with music and Girl Scout events, broadened my world—a world that expanded further when I entered the School Sisters of Notre dame (SSNd)—an international congregation of Roman Catholic women religious that has always believed that education, particularly for women, can transform society. I came alive to a more global context when I learned about, met, and spent time with other SSNds in North America and for short times in Asia, Central America, Africa, and Europe.

I am a lifelong learner supported by the School Sisters of Notre dame (SSNd) to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and philosophy. In addition, I have had numerous opportunities to study theology.

My ministries—in the Midwest, the South, and the East—have been rich and varied and opened still more doors to me. And then—late in life—I discovered clinical pastoral education and eventually became an ACpE Supervisor.

With this multi-faceted reality in mind, I come to the question: How does my Roman Catholic background inform my ministry of supervision for spiritual care? First of all, Roman Catholics believe (more in a practical than a creedal way) in the sacramentality of all creation. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins voiced this belief when he wrote “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” My commitment to the sacramentality of all creation means that I am willing to entertain any material that students present *in* supervising. Any work—playing with a child, listening to a nurse's heartache, singing to a dying person—can be spiritual because I expect to find the “footprint” of God everywhere.

Roman Catholics are story-people, steeped in centuries of living the liturgical year, annually re-visiting the mysteries of Advent and Christmas and Lent, Easter and Pentecost, and the 'ordinary' time in between. We are accustomed to stained glass windows whose colors often tell the story of Jesus and the stories of saints. In working with students, I listen carefully to their stories, their images, metaphors and their sub-texts. One of my favorite scriptural images for my own ministry as a pastoral educator is the Emmaus story, because often I identify with the role of the stranger who caught up with the two dejected persons traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The stranger asks a question I often ask in pastoral supervision. “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” (Lk 24:17). That is followed by the seemingly naïve “What things?” (24:19). From this story comes my desire to invite students to open *their* eyes as we 'walk along' together in the supervisor process.

When I first heard Roman Catholicism described as “smells and bells” I was taken aback. There is some truth in the phrase, however. We do use incense, candles, music, bells, beads, vestments, processions, statues, devotional practices, and special celebrations. Roman Catholicism is a faith tradition that Andrew Greeley once described as “enthralled by metaphors and

at the same time constantly uneasy about the metaphors it finds itself using.”

1 In my supervision I use metaphor, analogy, story, and poetry—what has been called the analogical or religious imagination. There is a mystical dimension to Catholic imagination. In that spirit, I ask students to appeal to more than one sense as they engage their peers in reflection. We have had centering prayer, a breathing-relaxing exercise, a YouTube circus film, reflection on an orange slice, and the Liturgy of the Hours. Students begin with their experience in *their* theologizing. Although inductive, experience-based theology through story and metaphor is messy at times, it remains honest to the student’s experience and their own analogical imagination.

Behind, beneath, within, outside of creation’s sacramentality is a loving Trinitarian God—both immanent and transcendent. Totally Other, God is at the same time closer to me than I am to myself. My God images, and those of my students, are always derivative and shatter in the face of our experiences to be replaced with still other images. While I myself continue to learn, I also walk with students as they learn to let go of making God in their image, instead of the other way around. I journey with them as both they and I try to appreciate more deeply, and give expression to, the depths of God’s intimate love for us. Our work together may at times look primarily psychological—dealing with fear, shame, control, rigidity, and the like—but it is based in a theology that God loves us *and* that human beings are essentially good.

In keeping with the emphasis of my religious community (SSNd) and an openness to the world that characterizes my understanding of Roman Catholicism, I am currently studying positive psychology, cosmic evolution, and the history of our early Christian tradition—always looking for connections. I am doing what Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in *Letters to a Young Poet*:²

Try to love the question themselves, like locked rooms and like books
written in a foreign language...And the point is, to live everything. Live
the questions now. perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually,
without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Why do I live the questions? Augustine said it one way: “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”³ My childhood catechism said it another way: Like all other persons I am made in the image and likeness of God, primarily through my intellect and my will. For me, *imago Dei* means questions. Because I view students in supervision through the eyes of that vision of *imago Dei*, I invite them to love the questions long enough to discover their own unique gifts for ministry.

NOTES

1. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990).
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Letter 4: July 16, 1903,” in *Letters to a Young Poet*, Stephen Mitchell, trans. (A Bookvirtual digital Edition), 23–24, accessed March 16, 2013, http://images.jenes.multiply.multiplycontent.com/attachment/0/R6Q3qgoKCs8AAE1U1x01/Rainer_Maria_Rilke_-_Letters_to_a_Young_poet.pdf?key=jenes:journal:112.
3. Augustine of Hippo, Book 1, in *Confessions* (electronic edition), 3, accessed March 16, 2013, <http://sparks.eserver.org/books/augustineconfess.pdf>.

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