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## **FROM PROGRAMMATIC TRIUMPHAL CHURCH TO RELATIONAL SERVANT ECCLESIA: A Conversion Narrative<sup>1</sup>**

by

Gregory Holmes Singleton, OFR

After putting the last issue of *The Progressive Catholic Review* to bed, I began to think about who I might lean on to contribute a part of her or his spiritual journey for the next issue. I then received a brief to-the-point note from a former contributor to the “Spiritual Journeys” section. He or she (I protect the identity of my sources) reasoned that I was probably about to “pounce on someone else” and then simply wrote, “Tell us your story or quit prying into ours.”<sup>2</sup>

She or he has a point. So be it.

Most of you know that I am verbose (though I tried hard to make this as compact as possible) and the one who leaned on me must realize that as well. Therefore blame him or her for the length of what follows.

**One Path / Many Paths:** All of our lives consist of one path that can usually be adequately determined only by an astute biography after our obits. They also consist of many constituent paths within that larger narrative. We are usually aware of most of these. As I prepared to write this piece of self-revelation, I considered several of those paths: from a childhood in a Fundamentalist culture in the deep south to a dazzling array of potential cosmologies as I traveled to

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this essay previously appeared in articles in *Union Theological Seminary Alumni Bulletin* and *Let's Talk: Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod* (ELCA).

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, just a few days after I finished this piece I received two who decided to share some of their journey and others soon followed.

California in search of fame, fortune, and education (one out of three isn't bad); from youthful rejection of Fundamentalism to Neo-Orthodoxy and beyond; from a neurotic practicing alcoholic to a sober neurotic recovering alcoholic, from a wildly dysfunctional family defined by a common DNA pool to a wonderful family of choice defined by affinity.

As formative as these experiences have been for my complex journey, the path that is most on my mind lately is the parallel narratives of my academic and ecclesial journeys. Thus, this essay consists of some reflections based on an academic career spent analyzing the dynamic interplay between the secular order and Christianity from a scholarly perspective, and a life in the church trying to understand those same dynamics from a Gospel perspective. Hopefully these reflections will be useful to others who are pondering some of the same issues. Much (probably most) of what follows will be insufferably personal, but when one talks about these matters one will find the experiential dimension necessary, and that which is experiential is unavoidably personal. Throughout it will be clear that I have concluded that if one is going to talk meaningfully about community (Christian or otherwise), and/or the church, and/or ministry, one will be talking about relationships. It will also be clear that I have come to this still evolving conclusion as the result of both a scholarly and an experiential conversion. While the two were inextricably intertwined as I lived through them, they are perhaps best communicated separately.

As I wonder where to begin this brief consideration of a huge topic, I glance through the titles in our home library. The books on the shelves are arranged in topical and disciplinary clusters, with one major exception. The books I consult most often are placed close at hand, independent of topic and discipline. Thus it is not unusual for *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*<sup>3</sup> to sit beside Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*<sup>4</sup>. All readers of *The Progressive Catholic Review* are familiar with the first book. The second may need a little introduction. Weber's *magnus opus* is a huge piece of scholarship in size (over 1,000 pages), in breadth, and in profundity. In it he accomplishes many things, but I will limit myself in this piece to his insights on large-scale organization, particularly bureaucracies. Thus, the Bible and Weber mark two ends of a continuum in how we conceptualize ministry. The ancient texts tell us of ministry that often takes place one person at a time. Weber's work contains some somber warnings about the organizational rejection of serendipitous opportunities for ministry as church bodies explore the

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<sup>3</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> The original German edition was published posthumously in 1921/22. From my perspective, the best English translation is *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978)

grander vision of addressing large national and international policy issues, embracing Daniel Burnham's admonition to make no small plans. I invite the reader to consider two possibilities. First, the Bible (particularly the Gospels) and the historical record of relational ministries of individuals and communities lead us in an incarnationally immediate, contextually nuanced, and Jesus-like direction. Second, the historical record of programmatic ministries of ecclesial bodies that have embraced more grandiose agendas (perhaps having ignored the lesson of the Tower of Babel) are not as exemplary and lead us in abstract, generalized, and inadvertently secular directions. Yes, this paragraph is a fair warning that, like most conversion narratives, this is as much a polemical piece as it is a reflection.

**Reflections on a Career in History:** The previous paragraph is something I would not have written in my youth. My college, seminary and graduate studies as well as most of the first decade of my professorial career as a scholar were given over to a search for institutional and programmatic solutions to all (or at least most) of the world's problems. Thus, my involvement in both the study of the church and the ministry of the church was largely institutional. I looked with a little pity and a great deal of disdain on the Apostolic and Early Patristic periods. In early antiquity Christians seemed to be unable to get their act together. I was struck, for example, by the quite different takes on the Council of Jerusalem reported in *Acts* and Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*. The variability in Christianity during the first three centuries was dismaying to me. Early in my undergraduate studies I encountered the preface to George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*. My Upper Division course work in Ancient History convinced me of the correctness of this perspective on the sometimes mutually exclusive cosmologies abounding in early Christianity.

Following my undergraduate work I moved to New York City to attend Union Theological Seminary, the place most likely to validate my mildly leftist Christian activism (The Divinity Schools at the University of Chicago or Harvard University might have worked just as well, but I wanted to study in the presence of Tillich and Niebuhr, bathed in the aura of the martyred Bonhoeffer). My cosmology having thus been sanctified I was unleashed on a congregation for a brief period of time before going on for doctoral work at UCLA where the faculty validated the democratic centrism not uncommon among those of us in the Christian and secular left at that time.<sup>5</sup> In 1971, as a still wet behind the ears Assistant Professor, my perspective on the insufficiencies of Early Christianity

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<sup>5</sup> It was not until my early 40s that I realized that "democratic centrism" was simply another phrase for the "deferential democracy" of the Colonial and Early National periods of American History of which I had been so critical. Both are part and parcel of modern programmatic approaches to the commonweal.

received further fuel from Robert Wilken's *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*<sup>6</sup> (although re-reading it many years later convinced me that I completely missed—or more precisely, reversed—the point Wilken was making).

The courses I constructed in Church History (I did not embrace the term “History of Christianity” until my late thirties) rushed past the early period. My lectures put on the brakes when I reached 325. One of my former students from those days recently told me that there was some speculation that we would spend more time on the Council of Nicaea than did the bishops who participated.

I was fascinated by the characteristics of the Constantinian/Theodosian era: the rationalization of theology, the emergence of a structure within the church that paralleled that of the Empire, and the notion that an entire social order and cultural form could become Christian. (I include these elements as a report on my perception in my late twenties to mid-thirties. I would no longer characterize the period in this way.) This perspective shaped how I looked at other eras as well, including the integrative intellectual achievements of the twelfth century (at the time I was a dedicated believer in the romantic vision of the twelfth century seamless synthesis of faith and reason as summarized in Henry Adam's *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*<sup>7</sup>) and the equally romantic vision of the rationalizing impacts of the Reformation (economic, social, and political as well as religious) presented in Preserved Smith's *The Age of the Reformation*<sup>8</sup>.

In my own research I sought the American variants of what had become my major theme. Puritan New England, particularly in the seventeenth century, was of obvious interest to me. Early in my career I joined a host of other historians in thinking of that complex web of theologies and social forms as a theocracy. I may have disagreed with many of the outcomes, but I admired what I (probably erroneously) perceived as a unified system. The various Awakenings were fascinating, but they tended to devolve into the sort of confusion of tongues that characterized the Apostolic and early Patristic periods. I was fascinated by the voluntary associations that emerged shortly after established state churches began to disappear in the early republic. These organizations (such as the American Home Mission Society, The American Tract Society, the American Temperance Society, and a host of abolitionist organizations) attempted to bring the moral force of a wide variety of American denominations of British Reformation origin together to operate as a *de facto* established church in the midst of a rapidly changing and only loosely organized nation. I immersed myself in the minutia of

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<sup>6</sup> Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Privately published in 1904. I highly recommend 1981 reprint edition published by Princeton University Press.

<sup>8</sup> New York: Holt, 1930.

minutes and reports, the rhetoric of pamphlets, and the tedium of membership lists. These were my kind of people. They were well organized, had a vision for bringing the Kingdom of God to earth now, and were somewhat impatient with those who said that we would always have the poor with us, even if it was Jesus who said it first.

If we engage scholarship honestly we often discover things that challenge our most cherished predilections. Through a succession of conference papers and publications, I increasingly realized that I was not writing a triumphant saga, but an ironic history. Those who sought to bring the Gospel to the center of public life not only were co-opted by an increasingly secular culture, they had a great deal to do with actually building that culture. As a scholar I found this was an interesting interpretation to develop, and had I been a secularist the twist ending might have amused me. As a Christian with (at that time) a slight triumphalist inclination I found my own scholarship devastating. When not in the classroom or attending ubiquitous committee meetings during most of the 1980s, I sought new ways to look at the History of Christianity.

Rethinking the History of Christianity from the beginning required a reassessment of primary sources and a consideration of scholarship about which I had previously known but whose topics had been off my radar screen. I spent far more time than ever before with the Jesus who formed relationships, who listened as well as spoke, who dined with a wide variety of people outside his primary group, who broke with social convention for the sake of illustrating the Gospel and who gave us an example of the new life to which we are called. I read between the lines in *Acts* to come to an appreciation of the nuanced difficulties of forming and maintaining Jesus-like relationships after the Ascension. I have received a great deal of help in this quest from works such as the essays in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*<sup>9</sup> edited by Jerome H. Neyrey, Luke Timothy Johnson's *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies*<sup>10</sup>, and Jaroslav Pelikan's commentary on *Acts*<sup>11</sup>. Fortunately, I was already familiar with Robert M. Grant's *Early Christianity and Society*<sup>12</sup> and that protected me from an exaggerated romanticism about pre-Nicaean Christian communities as perfect networks of loving relationships. That caveat does not prevent me from seeing relationship and community as foundational for both the internal life and the

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<sup>9</sup> Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Grand Rapids, MI: Barzos, 2005.

<sup>12</sup>New York: Harper Row, 1977.

ministry of *ekklesia*. I hold to this primarily because of the example of the actions of Jesus, the social implications of all four canonical Gospel narratives (not just *Luke*), and particularly the long discourse in the 13th through 17th chapters of *John*.

The Constantinian and Theodosian moments which wedded the Church to secular culture was at one time the lens through which I understood both the church as an institution and the church's programmatic ministry of social control. At this stage of my life that same period became for me an unfortunate bit of historical baggage we need to get beyond. My still emerging sense of ministry is now rooted in *ekklesia*—the continuing Body of Christ consisting of those called apart from individualism into community, and sent back to the world to minister in the name of the Risen One through relationships more than through agendas. My view of the History of Christianity changed from a linear development of an institution to the more subtle dynamic created by the tension between the secular culture, the institutional church and the relational community of *ekklesia*. The corollary is a dynamic created by the tension between institutional ministries of sweeping programs to address generalized issues and relational ministries in response to the needs of those we encounter. This perspective led me to delve more deeply into movements such as the Waldensians (12th century), Franciscans (13th century), Brethren of the Common Life / *Devotio Moderna* (14th century), and that group of migrants to New England who, in the 1630s, gathered in Anne Hutchinson's home for mid-week devotions in addition to being part of the assembly in the institutional Church on Sunday mornings. All of these started as intentional communities.<sup>13</sup>

There is much more, but these examples will suffice. Clearly my studies *eventually* gave me hope in the face of my initial despair.

**The Rambling Personal Reflection of a Christian:** The previous section is a summary of an understanding that evolved slowly in my career as a historian. It is still evolving in my retirement years. As a result of my scholarly reflection I experienced a transformation in my understanding of Christian vocation, the nature of the church, and the ministry to which we are all called through baptism. The

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<sup>13</sup> With the exception of the seventeenth-century Colonial American example, this cluster of influences is consistent with both my former Lutheran experience as well as my present non-Curial Catholic experience. See Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Ozment makes a persuasive argument that we need to understand the mid thirteenth through the mid sixteenth century as a unitary whole with reform as a continuing theme rather than accepting the convention wisdom of sharp division between the "High" period of the Middle Ages and the "Reformation" period of the Modern Era. On Anne Hutchinson and her companions see *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, ed. David D. Hall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

transformation (which began slowly in my thirties) was and continues to be multifaceted, but none of those facets is more important than the passage from programmatic institutional Christianity to relational Christianity. I did not easily give up my programmatic approach, and I still find it tucked away in corners of my consciousness.

I first became aware of having a sense of ecclesiology and Christian vocation following my freshman year in college. It was the summer of 1959. A group of us who were born somewhere around 1940 gathered to congratulate ourselves for being socially conscious, politically aware, and morally superior. (Yes, we were insufferable.) We imbibed equal portions of Kierkegaard, Barth, Teilhard de Chardin, Sartre and Simone. We canonized Buber, Bonhoeffer, Camus and Gramsci. We thrilled to the sound of the *Missa Luba* and prayed to Malcolm Boyd's running Jesus. We were on the verge of becoming mildly left activists. In short, we were the National Student Christian Federation.

For some in my generation the NSCF set the tone for the exciting possibilities with which the church was blessed in the 1960s. Those were glorious days, but the religious, social, and political ethos of the age was not without its shortcomings. In so saying, I do not recant one indignant outcry, nor annul one march, nor withdraw my signature from any one of a host of petitions. One need not retract in order to reevaluate, and reevaluation is mandatory for growth.

A variety of images inform my memory of this period. The earliest memories are still the most vivid. Just before the decade began (indeed, just on the heels of the 1959 NSCF Conference) a group of us from the West Coast rushed back from the meeting to gather outside the San Francisco City Hall. The House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings were in progress and we were there to protest as an act of political evangelism. We were only a small part of a much larger crowd. Others were there to witness as well: groups of nuns, Jews, Mennonites, and Marxists. This was the first political action event for those of us in the NSCF. Gus Hall and Herbert Marcuse had become our Amos and Obadiah. We had not abandoned Christian mentors, but they were not quite the prophets of change we wanted at the moment. Malcolm Boyd was not yet political. Theodore Gill and Eugene Carson Blake stopped short of overt action. Paul Tillich was highly suggestive, and we devoured his works, but he seemed too remotely located in Jungian thought for most of us who were political. There was, of course, Reinhold Niebuhr, but we had the uneasy feeling that he could be used to buttress the "other side" just as easily. All of the above would come to occupy places of honor in our pantheon, but none of them represented the prevailing Christian mood in 1959.

The dominant American Christian voices of the day were Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, and Fulton J. Sheen. Those of us in the NSCF were all

veterans of an endless series of tea-and-cookie church gatherings which seemed a bit too much like placid and meaningless pleasantries passing between those three paragons of popular piety. The timing was right. The NCSF whetted our appetites for some grander vision of discipleship than Sunday morning could offer. The HUAC in San Francisco provided our opportunity. We joined hands across and beyond denominational boundaries as we cried out for freedom of thought and speech. This was far more satisfying than joining hands with our co-religionists who condoned the actions of the HUAC. This was our baptism into political action. The San Francisco Fire and Police Departments immersed us in water bursting from fire hoses, swept us down the marble steps of the rotunda, and then gathered us into paddy wagons. On the way to the holding cells the nature of our religio-secular commitment became clear as we joined our voices in song. “Once to Every Man and Nation” melded with “Abolish the Committee, We Shall Not Be Moved.”

Although we protested against *specific* institutions throughout the sixties, those of us on the Christian left still believed in the efficacy of institutions in general—if they did what we wanted. While the secular counter-culture may have placed a premium on spontaneity, our “happenings” were the result of formal planning. We were committed to ecumenism but could not conceive of a whole—an *oikoumene*—that did not involve institutional organic unity. Indeed, institutions were a necessary precondition for our brand of commitment. The National and World Councils of Churches provided an initial backdrop. For college youth (and, God help us, more than a few of us thought we defined the universe), there were organizations like the NSCF. The ultimate expression came with the Blake-Pike Proposal of 1962 and the resultant Consultation on Church Union. The strengths of deliberate institutional ecumenism are obvious. The weakness, and the folly, was that we excluded as much as we included. COCU was limited to a handful of traditions, specifically those denominations of a WASPish sort. The NCC and WCC were comfortable housings for moderate and liberal denominations. The conservatives took refuge in the American Council of Christian Churches and the International Council of Christian Churches. The division indicated by the paired organizations was deep and long-lasting. No matter how much I have mellowed over the decades, I would still find it difficult to be in fellowship with the likes of Carl McIntyre.

But what few of us considered back in the sixties is that the ACCC and ICCC represented many who were *not* McIntyre. We ironically ignored them in the name of ecumenism. The NSCF had a variety of conservative counterparts. In California during my undergraduate and graduate school years, the most prominent of those was Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade for Christ. We will never know

whether dialogue between the two groups would have been fruitful. Neither side was willing to try.

Most of us on the Christian left were also associated at various times with organizations such as the ACLU, SCLC, and the SDS. I was a member of all three and can't imagine that my Christian response to the conditions at that time could have been any different than it was. Unfortunately, my participation in these activities was underscored by a smug moral stance (alas, not unusual in our crowd) that left little room for dialogue with those with alternative views.

We were fixated on a strange blend of eschatology and secular "significance," with more than a pinch of impatience. We wanted our social justice, our ecumenism, and our Kingdom of God on earth, and we wanted it *now*. Thus we required our religious events to be purposeful stepping stones toward those ends. Part of our "significance" mania can be attributed to an earnest seriousness that had little room for irony and humor. We had not yet learned the virtue of the dictum put forward by Martin Marty and Dean Peerman early in the sixties: there are things that one does well to take very, very seriously, but not all that seriously. There was some virtue in our eagerness. Historian Timothy Smith has shown how millennialism gave focus and immediacy to some American reform movements (particularly abolitionism) in the nineteenth century.

Immediacy does lead to very intense commitment. On the debit side, such intensity, with its impatience and lack of irony and humor, tends to give rise to movements that burn out quickly. Certainly we did. In my case, the burnout coincided with my discovery of the ironic outcome of my beloved institutional ecclesiology. Fortunately, the cure for my despair began to take shape early in the 1980s. My emerging experiential / relational / communal ecclesiology prepared me to look for church (or more properly *ekklesia*) in other than specific institutional expressions.

Some of these expressions took place in institutional settings, but in some ways the settings were irrelevant. For example, the Notre Dame Seminar on American Religion (1980-1992) was not planned as an ecumenical experience, but became one. Jay Dolan, the seminar's *major domo*, pulled together about thirty scholars from the Midwest with diverse disciplinary, research, and methodological foci to form one of the most exciting and productive ongoing conversations in which I have ever been involved. Dolan planned the scholarly diversity. The religious diversity was an unanticipated bonus. A half-century earlier it would have been unthinkable to form an ongoing colloquium composed of university, college, and seminary faculty from Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Lutheran, Anglican, Evangelical, Jewish and secular institutions. At the evening meal during one of our meetings I was joined by a lay member of the Reformed Church in America, a Jesuit, a Methodist clergyperson, and an Anglican layperson.

We had come to know each other as scholars and as people of faith. We laughed as we considered what the founders of our host university would have thought if they had been told that someday Protestant, Jewish and secular scholars would meet with Catholic scholars in order to discuss a recent book on the Mormon experience in America.

During the 1981-82 academic year I was on sabbatical leave and enjoyed residence at the University of Chicago's Divinity School as a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion. The Divinity School had a reputation as a citadel of smug, contemptuous, haughty modernism. While I encountered that attitude among a few (very few, actually) of the denizens of Swift Hall, something fresh and exciting was going on. Pluralism, long studied at the Divinity School, found an experiential home there. The School's WASPy mainline hegemony had already been broken by Lutherans (Pelikan, Brauer, and Marty), African-Americans (Scott and Long), and Roman Catholics (Tracy, Carr, and McGinn). Now, in the early '80s, Evangelicals were a palpable presence. Excellent students from Wheaton, Birmingham Southern, Baylor, Stetson and other citadels of American Evangelicalism were a delightful and creative challenge to the dominant mood of the Divinity School. The intellectual life in the Little Gothic School on the Prairie was far more lively and far less complacent than I anticipated. I had expected to find a nostalgic taste of the '60s at the University of Chicago. To my great delight, I found instead a thriving introduction to an ecumenism of a different sort.

During the late '80s I was associated with the Religion in American Life Project of Indiana University / Purdue University, Indianapolis. This wonderful brain-child of Jan Shipps (funded by a generous Lilly Foundation grant) involved an ongoing series of seminars and public lectures culminating in a major conference in the Spring of 1989. The project was both an academic and public success. Those of us who had been around for a while were impressed by the new generation of academic specialists in American Religion. Those participants invited from non-academic sectors of various religions indicated that they benefited from exposure to scholars. We most certainly benefited from their presence. Beyond the papers and formal sessions with a variety of academic and non-academic publics the ecumenical nature of our gathering was realized in private conversations. At the opening plenary session I sat with a traditionalist Anglo-Catholic specialist in 17<sup>th</sup> century American Puritanism as we listened to a radical African-American Baptist give the Keynote Address. Afterwards we appreciatively discussed the message in theological terms that transcended our different ecclesiologies. I had a long lunch with a Jesuit scholar who is a fellow social historian of American religion. We discovered in that remarkable conversation how much our common subject matter and methodology shaped our

similar theologies. I sat next to an Evangelical conservative at the conference banquet as we listened to a Nazarene scholar lambaste Republicans because they seemed not to realize that eschatology has radical pacifist implications. Both the Evangelical conservative and I agreed that the Gospel does indeed compel us to be peace-makers. We also agreed that the question of how we do that would continue to divide us. But at least we could talk enough to agree on that. I stayed up until two in the morning with the Executive Presbyter of a Synod of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. The man is about my age and another veteran of the ecumenical and political battles of the '60s. A quarter of a century ago we would have exhorted others to leave the sanctuary and join hands in the streets as we marched for justice. We now find ourselves interested in the sanctuary again. We shared numerous anecdotes and remembrances of a legion of worship experiences. We agreed that our slogan would be, "Organizational unity be damned! We will worship our way together!"

Part of my transformation involved two quite different (but in some ways quite similar) ongoing musical experiences. A little over two decades ago I read a notice about what I thought was going to be a concert of Early American hymnody at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. When I arrived someone put a book in my hand, asked what voice I sing, and escorted me to the bass section. I found myself sitting in the "hollow square" of a Sacred Harp Singing. Since then I have been to Singings in various parts of the South and often welcome New England and Southern singers in my home when they visit for the annual Midwestern Sacred Harp Convention. As a result I have come to know, love, and share stories of spiritual pilgrimages with Evangelicals and Fundamentalists I once would have considered the enemy.

On another occasion (also about two decades ago), following a lead provided by one of my students, I found myself in Oak Park Illinois at a Roman Catholic parish sitting in tears as I experienced for the first time the joy, serenity, beauty and power of Taizé vespers. Two days later I distributed a letter at my Lutheran parish in which I described the experience and invited others to join me. It became a monthly pilgrimage for many of us. These services of song and prayer augment my liturgical rhythm and put me in meaningful contact with Christians from a wide variety of traditions.

These activities and more define my present ecumenism. Most of my involvement is prosaic, but has great personal meaning. Most of the experiences have not been ecumenical by design, they just turned out that way. In these less planned sessions that are less burdened with expectations I find much greater willingness to talk across lines. I also find a sort of relational ecumenism emerging as well. People who at one time spoke exclusively in faith statements are now willing to entertain the value of rigorous analysis. Those of us who adhered

strictly to the style of formal logic have learned to be more comfortable with faith statements. At various gatherings our common meals have become *αγαπε* (*agape*) without fanfare or publicity.

Thus, unlike the strident and programmatic progressivism of my youth, in the last few decades I have concentrated on what is available right at hand—a more loosely defined relational ecumenism that will allow activists to activate, moderates to moderate, conservatives to conserve, contemplatives to contemplate, and all of us to talk in frank and faith-filled ways about both action and inaction. If this is not the sort of ecumenism I hoped for in my youth, it is nevertheless viable. The ecumenism of my yesteryear was intended to be accomplished immediately so that we could usher in the Christian variant of the Age of Aquarius. My present ecumenism, with all its limitations, has the virtue of giving subsequent generations something upon which to build.

As if this were not gift enough, this transformation also put me more fully in touch with my strong leanings toward a Catholic expression of the Christian faith. Many experiences contributed to this renewal and they all took me into the heart of the sacramental life, the communal nature of the Church, and the simplicity of the Gospel. My political orientation has not taken a turn to the right, but I no longer see myself as an agent of systemic change. I see myself as the beneficiary of the constant renewal brought about by being housed in the Body of Christ, centered in the Gospel, participating in the community of *ekklesia*, and regularly nurtured by Word and Sacrament. I hope to present myself as one who is changed by Christ and inviting others to surrender to this life transforming change.

The most immediate manifestation of this transformation has been shared with my wife, Jeannine and with the community of which we have become a part. Our life together has been enriched by numerous examples of ministerial opportunities we encounter in the prosaic events of everyday life, including inadvertently and quietly giving witness during one-on-one conversations. Almost five years ago we participated in forming an intentional community of worship and ministry (sometimes called “house church”). We began with three members on Advent I of 2007 and now number six. In percentage growth I suppose that could be made to look impressive, but the absolute numbers will not gain the attention of advocates of the Church Growth Movement. It is our small size, making every member a part of a servant community, that allows us to draw upon the academic experience of our members to engage in an active educational ministry (of which *The Progressive Catholic Review* is a part) and to lay plans for actively engaging three populations in the Rogers Park/Evanston area (the aging, the homeless, and university students) in a matrix of dialogue and service. We are not a portion of a congregation seeking the financial and moral support of others for going forward. In all things we are a committee of the whole. We have drawn upon the examples

of both the Franciscans and the Brethren of the Common life.<sup>14</sup> Our community is named after Francis, and our founding thought is of Francis attempting to rebuild the ruined Church of San Damiano only to realize that the church he was to rebuild was a community, and that his construction materials were not bricks but relationships. As we continue our life together in Christ as the Community of St. Francis we try to keep the following principles in mind:

This is how we experience our call to live out our baptismal covenant. An intentional community is not the way for everyone, nor is it a superior way. But it is a way that does have legitimacy within the Body of Christ. Just as there are some things an intentional relational community can do best, such as encountering others one-on-one or in small groups, there are some things a congregation can do that an intentional community can't. We seek alliances with these larger ecclesial entities across denominations to foster dialogue between these two expressions of the Body of Christ.

We learn from the Great Tradition of the Church over centuries and across ecclesial traditions. In our study and meditation, the wisdom of the ancient Doctors of the Church stand shoulder to shoulder with contemporary insights. From the early Doctors we get our foundational theology. From contemporaries, such as the Rev. Dr. Frank Senn, we get encouragement to make the ancient tradition live on in spaces and communities that are in our time innovative, but in the history of the church quite ancient indeed (see particularly the final chapter and epilogue of Senn's *The People's Work: A Social History of the Liturgy*<sup>15</sup>).

We look for the broadest possible definition and experience of the church catholic, and think less in terms of denomination and more in terms of the extent to which a given community of faith manifests the love of God in Christ Jesus, and the extent to which the ministry that goes forth from that community proclaims the Gospel in word and action. We use this standard for assessing ourselves.

We have come to believe that an intentional community needs to be involved in the celebration of Word and Sacrament as often as possible, and that this celebration is the best method of continuing formation to go forth in the name of Christ. We also believe that the intentionality of the community—including several common meals throughout the week, frequent conversations and social gatherings, and mutual accountability and support as we go about developing our ministries to the world beyond us—is an important part of that formation. To the old dictum that the way we worship shapes the way we believe we would add a

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<sup>14</sup> While still in the Episcopal Church I had entered The Society of St. Francis. Jeanine took simple vows in 2008 and solemn vows (along with Fr. Nioclás Kelly) in 2010. In October 2010 the Community of St. Francis joined with the Franciscans of Fort Lauderdale and three members of San Damiano Parish to form the Franciscans of Reconciliation.

<sup>15</sup> Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.

corollary: the way we relate to one another within the Body of Christ shapes the way we relate to those to whom our community ministers.

We have come to believe that the love of God in Christ Jesus requires unqualified honesty as we relate to others. Thus, we avoid indirection, vagueness and evasion in our rhetoric. We would rather give unintended offense motivated by the radical honesty demanded by love than run the risk of betraying trust with seeming “niceness.”

We have come to believe that the Gospel calls us to be servants, to discern the needs of those we encounter in conversation with them and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to be open to radical challenges to our preconceptions as we continue to study the Word, be nourished by the Sacraments, and experience enrichment from fellowship with those whom we encounter, even—or especially—in serendipitous encounters.

While we do make plans, we realize that they are always Plan B. Plan A is always in God’s province, and we trust that God’s plan will be revealed to us in often surprising ways. Programmatic ministry may be called for from time to time, but relational ministry is always in order.

As a corollary to the above, we have come to believe that programmatic plans for ministry can potentially lead to a reliance on our own abilities and insights. Being relational means that we are prepared to encounter Christ most unexpected places, and relying on God to reveal that to us as we go along.

So, to complete this brief chronicle of my conversion experience over the past six decades, add my transition from the contradictory individualist prophet of a corporate and institutionalized Christianity to the advocacy of communal experience and an openness to prophesy from a wider variety of others.<sup>16</sup> This is not a final word, but an interim report of this journey. Check back with me in ten years and I’ll probably have more conversions to add to the list and by then I will have an octogenarian perspective from which to interpret them.

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<sup>16</sup> To avoid a misunderstanding of this sentence, I urge the reader not to confuse this openness with a passive and uncritical acceptance of other points of view. “Openness” is not devoid of a rigorous testing of the integrity and intellectual viability of other perspectives. “Openness” is not a synonym for unconditional agreement. “Openness” indicates a willingness to *consider* other perspectives and engage in dialogue with those who hold them.