

SHAME AND EVANGELIZATION

At first, the title of this article may seem strange. Nevertheless, when examined, there appears to be a close but harmful relationship between the two as actually practiced. I would like to explore both of these areas and give focus to them in such a way that it will be helpful to deans of discipline, to religion teachers, to the adolescent retreat and encounter facilitator, and in a general way to adults dealing with adolescents. One of the things that has always bothered me in my years of teaching and giving youth retreats and encounters was the resistance by young people to things religious. And yet, when one gets beyond the facade into the person, the hunger for God and the deep spirituality that one finds in young people is awe-inspiring. In spite of this yearning for spirituality, and in many cases a genuine advance and growth in the spiritual life, there still remains a spectrum from hostility to deep suspicion of things religious. I believe that a clue to understanding this phenomenon is the role that shame has played in institutions of evangelization and education as well as the methodology and techniques that are commonly used. As I talk about shame, I would like to put some parameters on the words as I use them.

SHAME is the pain of feeling exposed to oneself or to others as defective, deficient, and flawed; it is the rupture of the self with the self; and it is excruciatingly painful because the self is exposed to the self as failure. This inner torment leads to deep spiritual malaise, which combines a feeling of being basically alone with the sense of absence and emptiness. John Bradshaw calls this **toxic shame** which he distinguishes from **healthy shame**. **Healthy shame** puts one in touch with one's self, the limitations one has as a creature, the need for others, the need for relationship, the need for help. It lets us know that we are not God. Erikson points out the role of shame in the second stage of development. It is healthy when the primary caretaker—in Erikson's framework, the parents—has established trust the child can begin to set his/her own boundaries, learning to hold on and to let go, at different levels of being.

GUILT. Guilt and shame are often confused. Guilt, in a healthy sense, would be the psycho-emotional pain one feels in violating a norm or value that is part of one's moral values system. It can be relieved without any effect on the goodness or the badness of the

person. **Toxic shame** in the same situation would respond by saying, "I have done something bad, therefore I am bad."

By the time one deals with school age children or adolescents the healthy based identity elements or the shame-based elements are already in place. What is done in the class can re-enforce the shame-based identity elements or diminish them. The very nature of shame is to keep itself hidden from the self of the shame-based person. The pain is excruciating, as children and adolescents who habitually cry themselves to sleep can testify. There are many shame-inducing procedures and situations within our educational and religious system. Some are blatantly so, others more subtly so. The common shame-inducing forms include: comparison with other children or with brothers, sisters or parents who have been educated previously by the same teacher or in the same institution; inattention or lack of response to the child; ridicule and pointing out defects publicly; abuse—physical, verbal, emotional or sexual; establishing gradations secretly or non-verbally on intelligence, race, economics, or social standing; not answering questions honestly; demanding instant perfection and maturity—either verbally or non-verbally. Less blatant forms are ensconced in "conventional wisdom" and are perhaps most shame-inducing. I would like to mention some very specific ones that are found in the home, the school, the catechism classes, and in unconscious attitudes expressed in conversation, be it in the home or in neighborhood or social gatherings.

1. Insufficient sharing of the adult's experience of God with the result that everything about God has been converted into doctrine and morals. The adult's experience of God is seldom shared and is usually substituted for doctrines which are the concrete expressions of past believers' search for God and the significance of Jesus. This verbal relic becomes distasteful for the child because the child lacks the needed sense of history. People's search for understanding of God from past centuries has become the "content of religious teaching" both formal and informal. The vocabulary of the past becomes meaningless (transsubstantiation, hypostatic union) or the present meanings of the vocabulary distort the meaning of the past (person, Father) in such a way as to render the evangelization as totally divorced from reality. The expectation of both adult and institution is that these words be learned rather than their meaning becoming grounded in the experience of the child and the child's nascent experience of God, it causes the child to think that he or she is deficient because these doctrines and moral principles are not understood nor do they relate to the experience of life. As a result, the affective experience of God and religion becomes bound in shame and distaste. I taught religion in a small town in Colombia some years ago. I would present some material in class and the students invariably would be bored, resistant,

and even hostile. Later we would go out for a coke with a few students, or have a conversation in the plaza and I would say the same things that I said in class the day before, and lively interesting discussions would ensue. I came to see that the shame-bound structures that are associated with religion are to a great number of people very painful and therefore resisted, but life-filled sharing of God and the experience of God holds people's attention.

2. The sacrament of reconciliation perceived as shameful and invasive. "Conventional wisdom" would say that the boy or girl who did not go to confession during a retreat or who never went to communion at masses was "hardened". No matter how much teachers, priests, and religious insisted otherwise, at the feeling-conduct level this was the perceived attitude (there were and there still are many places that publicly communicate that this is the case). The "collective experience" of confession has always been bi-polar. One pole would be a certain feeling of relief for having dealt with the guilt, and the other would be the experience of fear and shame in the confessing. Enough people have had negative experiences of confession and are talking about them that on a popular level the use of confession as a means of experiencing reconciliation with God is declining at an astounding rate. Materialism, hedonism, and hardness of heart are the common explanations given for this decline. Yet studies and research indicate that the search for spirituality and for God is stronger than ever at all levels of society. If one uses the formation of 12 Step groups as an index –one that demands "a searching and fearless moral inventory", an "admission of our exact nature of our wrongs to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" – many of the people who participate in these experiences have found them liberating. Many such participants of these groups are or have been Catholics and have found their life experience of confession shaming by contrast. It would be helpful to us as religious educators to look at what we are doing through the filter of shame in order to see if and how we are distorting the good news of the

Gospel, and as a result, leaving people with an experience totally opposite of what we intend in our evangelizing efforts. The Good News of Jesus was indeed very simple and continues as our prime task. It seems that much shame-inducing baggage has been hung on the Gospel completely distorting it and making it a source of pain instead of a source of freedom.

3. The fusion of Human Sexuality and Morality. The whole area of human sexuality is indeed surrounded and permeated with **toxic shame** for the majority of human beings, whether its expression be by excess or by defect. Secrecy and a conspiracy of silence rooted in shame surround most children's and adolescents' introduction into this important dimension of human life. The church historically, has evolved into the protector of sexual moral rectitude. As a result, in the popular mind to be religious is to be against sex and sexual expression –and attitude which is not without historical justification, all the protests to the contrary. In many countries morality has come to be coterminous with sexual morality. This fusion of the gospel with moral rectitude and has been disastrous for the Gospel and for healthy sexuality rooted in love and an expression thereof. The heart of the Good News is God's unconditional love for us and the freedom that results from this reconciliation (II Cor. 5:14-6:2). The use of shame to control and deal with sexuality is theme for another essay.

It would be helpful then for us to discover how shame has permeated our evangelization efforts and do what is necessary to reduce the shame within the cultural context of each ethnic group. Evangelization, rightly done, gives people the experience of Jesus' words, "I have come that you may have life – abundant life." (Jn. 10:10)

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