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Faith, Piety, and Non-institutional Christianity: Popular Religion among Homeless Women

CHURCH TEACHING

In a very well-known and much quoted passage, Pope Paul VI declared that “evangelization loses much of its force if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 63).

A much more recent Roman document, entitled “Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture” (*Origins*, 1999), contains a range of references to the concreteness and actuality of culture, stating that “culture is the whole of human activity, human intelligence and emotions, the human quest for meaning, human customs and ethics” (n. 2), and asserting that “the pastoral approach to culture focuses on real situations . . .” (n. 6). The text goes on to identify the “huge agglomerations of people who are socially rootless, politically powerless, economically marginalized and culturally isolated” . . . , and “people whose lives are unraveled” (n. 8).

Having thus drawn attention to the focus of this document, the authors make three interrelated points. First: “The church asserts the dignity of the human person, . . . and affirming her preferential option for the poor and excluded, the church is duty bound to promote a culture of solidarity at every level of society” (n. 21). Second: “If . . . pastoral workers, Christian communities and qualified theologians . . . are to touch people’s hearts, [then] proclaiming the Gospel . . . and celebrating salvation in the liturgy demand not only a profound knowledge of the faith but also a knowledge of the cultural environment” (n. 27). And third: “Popular piety is the way a people expresses its faith and its relationship to God and [God’s] Providence . . .” (n. 28).

These are noble sentiments and admirable instructions. But they are certainly not new, even though many—“pastoral workers, Christian communities and qualified theologians”—may have failed to hear or practice them. But sadly, this recent document fails to pursue the implications of its own statements. After the impressive rhetoric, we might fail to notice the assumption on which the remainder of the text ap-

pears to rest: that “culture” applies only to social reality that is homogeneous, stable, or dominant. In consequence, the document simply overlooks some of the most brute social facts of our times, and a very significant minority of the population.

The present essay attempts to sketch the features of a social reality that cries out for a deeper and more informed pastoral outreach. The Churches, through their institutional structure or through individual or community responses, are undoubtedly pivotal in responding to the needs of the people profiled here. Yet such outreach is usually excluded from conversation about evangelization; the clergy and other professional ministers are not prominently involved; and though many homeless people choose to attend churches, a significant number appear deliberately to avoid Roman Catholic churches and their liturgies. The outreach I have in mind therefore, would take the sentiments expressed by Paul VI very seriously, and respond to the even more poignant and pointed words of Jesus himself. As he articulates a kind of personal job description (one that will apply also to his followers, as Matt 25:35ff makes only too clear), Jesus first declares, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and then he identifies the poor, captives, the blind and oppressed—the rootless, disenfranchised pariahs—as the beneficiaries of his Spirit-led, healing, restoring, humanizing ministry (Luke 4:18).

SOCIAL FACTS

The second half of the twentieth century saw human degradation and destabilization on an unprecedented scale. This is no hyperbole but stark reality: refugees and displaced people generally (whether victims of war, of political instability or of lack of hospitality) were among the most visible; but universally the growing numbers of urban poor (and for the present purposes, specifically in the United States as it experienced an unprecedented economic boom) were perhaps the least visible. If the plight of the visible (Kosovo? Sierra Leone? Turkey?) sometimes provoked a humanitarian response, the plight of the rest was simply not noticed.

We are all dulled by “facts, damn facts, and statistics.” Nevertheless, a profile of the homeless poor of this country provides a context for thoughts about popular religiosity and pastoral responses. Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked. As Jesus ruefully said, “the poor are with you always” (Matt 26:11). Indeed, “the poor” whom Jesus encountered at the beginning of the first millennium in Palestine, are with us at the beginning of the third millennium in the United States, in the faces of today’s homeless people: largely invisible, easily avoidable, and virtually uncountable because they are an unstable and shifting population. It is easier to indicate trends or identify categories

than to produce incontestable statistics or irrefutable evidence: mere facts do not convince everyone. Yet for all this, “the homeless poor” is a category that comprises flesh and blood citizens, real people, a fragile culture, and the very human beings to whom Jesus was most devoted.

In 1997, 35.6 million Americans (13.3 percent of the population) lived in poverty; 41 percent of these (14.6 million) had incomes *less than half the poverty level* (National Coalition for the Homeless, June 1999). That year alone, 675,000 people lost health insurance due to welfare reform legislation. In the twenty years after 1973, two and a quarter million low-rent units disappeared, while between 1991 and 1995, low-income rents rose 21 percent. By 1995 the number of low-income renters outstripped available units by 4.4 million. Add to this the incidence of domestic violence, mental illness, and addiction disorders, and the cohort of homeless people in this country is as populous as a small nation. In every city, official estimates of the homeless population exceed the available bed space, and rural areas are relatively worse than urban centers. Homelessness results, in large measure, from people being forced to choose between food, shelter, and other basic needs.

Imagine an infra-red “snapshot” of the United States taken on a balmy spring night: it would show a count of around 700,000 men, women and children *in officially designated shelters*, but up to two million more “hidden homeless” sleeping in the open or in abandoned cars or buildings. However, perhaps twelve million Americans have been homeless at some time, and more than half of that number (6.6 million) experienced homelessness in the five years before 1994. On average, every cot in a shelter accommodates between four and six people per year; and between 1987 and 1997 shelter capacity increased between 200 percent and 300 percent. It would be bad enough if these were statistics; tragically, the figures represent real people.

REAL PEOPLE

How do actual people survive the dislocation and trauma of homelessness? How do they find, or make, or maintain some vestige of meaning in their lives? Why do so many manage to retain a modicum of dignity, humor and faith, when their daily round is so undignified, their lives so lacking in the lighter side, and the promises of organized religion so hollow? And where is, and should be, “the Church” in the shape of committed Christians and pastoral programs?

In the form of a description more than an analysis, in terms more pastoral than sociological, and by way of an attempt to identify the “inner history” rather than to expatiate about homelessness and its practitioner-victims, my remarks will apply particularly to one group of people, scattered and constantly changing, but countable in the hundreds of thousands on any given night: the homeless women of America.

As the brute statistics indicate, homeless people can be grouped in many categories. Yet categories soon become stereotypes if not social stigmas: mental defectives; substance abusers; socially unskilled; unemployable; claustrophobic; feckless; losers. But these labels are affixed to human persons with inner lives. In fact their inner lives are often their most important identifier and the most convincing explanation of their survival. So why are these inner lives so little explored, belittled, or simply not understood by the Christian community? A glimpse into the lives of the homeless poor may disclose not only extremely interesting manifestations of popular religiosity, but a form of non-institutional Christianity which serves to point an accusing finger at Churches and congregations which overlook these people and their plight (notwithstanding the excellent work and witness provided by many agencies dedicated to the homeless poor).

POPULAR RELIGION

The phrase “popular religiosity” has a rather condescending ring, and “popular religion” is not much better. This is because the connotations of “popular” and “religiosity” tend to separate it from mainstream experience and approval (for a review of the language, Parker, 1996; Bamat and Wiest, 1999). “The religion of (the) people” or “(ordinary) people’s religion” may be an improvement if one intends to identify the honest—and therefore authentic—attempts of (ordinary) people to communicate in a Godly manner both with divinity and humanity. By whatever name, popular religion is often informal, not “organized,” and at variance with the declared orthodoxy of a particular institutional Church.

Such religious expression actually represents the honest efforts of people who are separated from institutional religion, whether because of excommunication or feelings of worthlessness, because of personal unacceptability or the lack of encounter, or simply because of the perceived irrelevance of such organized religion. As Paul VI said, unless evangelization is addressed to real people in their concrete situations, it loses much of its force—which is partly why orthodox religion has in fact lost many adherents. Many homeless people have a profound desire to enjoy the freedom of religious practice, but either feel excluded by mainstream Christianity or are simply not able to identify with its perceived middle class, doctrinaire agendas, and hypocrisy.

Popular religion, or popular religiosity, is alive and well in our cities. It is popular—“regarded with favor or approval” by many. It is popular—“pertaining to or representing the people, especially the common people.” And it is popular—“of the people as a whole; of the general masses.” To many middle-class people, such dictionary definitions of popularity bespeak vulgarity, and certainly otherness. Popularity thus

understood has no social cachet. Many upwardly mobile Christians, imbued with the so-called “Protestant Ethic,” seem to find it not only alien but reprehensible. The official Church, wittingly or not, is tarred with the same brush.

The “inner history” of a person or a people (a helpful phrase of H. Richard Niebuhr) represents the perspective they have as they look out on the world: a particular, concrete, bounded world. Many of us know the “outer history” so to speak, of people or groups: that is, we *know about* such people or their worlds, about whether they are the typical tax collectors, prostitutes, cripples, lepers, and sinners of the New Testament or “the homeless,” “prostitutes,” “AIDS sufferers” or any other category we care to name. But to *know about* something or someone may be possible without leaving one’s comfortable armchair; truly to *know* someone or something demands encounter.

Jesus knew much more than the outer history of people. Not only did he *know about* categories of people (“the poor”), he *actually knew real persons*: *this* rich young man, *that* tax collector, *this* woman caught in adultery, *that* centurion, and so on. And as he encountered them, so he responded to their existential situation, whether they were named Bartimeus or Nicodemus, Mary or Martha, or whether their names have been lost because no one ever recorded them—like the widow, the woman who poured ointment, the Syrophenician or the Samaritan.

It is simply unacceptable—pastorally—to *know about* people, or indeed cultures: we are called to follow the example of Jesus and to encounter cultures through people, and to know about people by actually knowing them. One of the shortcomings of “Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture” is precisely its title: it is impossible to approach “culture” pastorally: any pastoral approach must be to flesh and blood people. The homeless poor are people before they are statistics or components of culture.

OFFICIAL RELIGION

It is certainly possible to characterize the broad lines of popular and official religion and to compare practices and practitioners. However, this is nothing more than a beginning: it may indeed help us to *know about* something or someone. A first stage toward *actually knowing* the people identified as practitioners of popular religion would be to ask: why might they respond this way, and not in other (official) ways? Or, more pointedly we might inquire how the label “popular religion” describes what its practitioners experience as popular, congenial, attractive, and indeed relevant to their actual lives.

We can identify some broad interpretive themes or categories with which to understand popular religiosity, and then compare and contrast popular and official forms of religion. Seven such categories have

been identified (Rodriguez-Holguin,1990), (see fig. 1). They are presented here as a way to compare popular and official religion.

Like most models or categories, this representation is neither perfect nor watertight. But it might help us understand the broad contours of worlds of experience and fields of relationships, in such a way as to extrapolate from, and compare, some of the “inner history” of different people. As far as homeless persons are concerned, it will need some fine-tuning. Yet it does, I hope, provide a key rather than a crowbar, for entry into other worlds of meaning.

The world of homeless people is a different world from—though it touches and sometimes overlaps with—the world of the salary-earning, job-secure, educated, insured homeowners. It is a world in which

Fig. 1

<i>CATEGORIES</i>	<i>POPULAR RELIGIOSITY</i>	<i>OFFICIAL RELIGION</i>
Thought structures	<i>Principle of participation:</i> everything is related and interdependent. Belief is informal or unformalized.	<i>Principle of contradiction:</i> Every person and thing is discrete and different. Belief is codified and formalized.
The sacred	Sacred and profane are distinguishable and distinguished, but not dichotomized. Utilitarian considerations govern religious action.	Religious faith and expression are often perceived as sacred, and distinct from ordinary life. Orthodoxy governs religious action.
Nature and the world	Nature itself is to be respected; is holy. Animate and inanimate creation is interrelated.	Nature is profane and minimally integrated with religious action; is used, exploited, dominated. [Bellah, 1998]
Space and time	Special places and times, but <i>all</i> are permeated by holy/sacred. <i>Ritualization</i> celebrates the holy.	Only official times and places are sacred. <i>Consecration</i> makes things/persons holy.
Social politics	Popular religion is rooted in marginalization and oppression; always different from official religion.	Official religion is for and of the centers of privilege and respectability; popular religion is abnormal.
Historical project	It looks to a better future for the poor; implies radical social change.	Progressive evolution of human history; God legitimizes people’s achievements and possessions.
Social organization	“Horizontal” rather than “vertical” relationships are important; people are united by their common experiences.	Structures are perceived as “vertical” and hierarchically ordered; people are separated by their differing statuses.

they must find or create meaning, for the conventional meanings of the dominant culture do not translate very well. If they fail to engage meaningfully with others, they will either go mad or perish. But among the most impressive characteristics of many homeless people are their ingenuity and their hope. It has been estimated that in the event of a natural disaster or nuclear catastrophe, the homeless poor would be among the least traumatized and the first to survive: such an experience would be little more than an extension of their daily round. But curiously and impressively, their survival would be attributable as much to their solidarity and cooperation, their shared meanings and symbols—their culture—as to their individual initiative.

PEOPLE'S RELIGION

Popular religion is not a phrase used by those whose belief, piety and devotion it purports to describe. And popular culture is not a subject of research among most of those who study human groups and societies. But both “popular religion” and “popular culture” are signposts pointing in the direction of real people. In general, the belief, beliefs, or convictions of the homeless poor are neither formalized nor standardized, and many homeless people synthesize elements that may appear to others logically incompatible. Thus an all-loving God may be their rock in a palpably unjust and capricious world; and God will always be there, even though “there” is the abandoned car or condemned building. Oscar Wilde may have quipped that “we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars,” but those who are actually in the gutter and cannot see the stars need a different form of sustenance than the star-gazers.

Like frightened animals in a headlight's glare, some of the homeless poor freeze, or crash to their destruction. Yet many have histories—and *herstories*—which, given time, they may share with people from a more conventional world and a more “official” religious perspective. Their anti-social or unsocialized behaviors may melt away, to disclose graciousness, wit and wisdom. Given time, then—something they are rarely given by anyone (though they may be given handouts, or “services”)—they are palpably able to reciprocate with respectful attention, and eye-contact in appropriate measure. Yet it may take years, and even a decade, to establish trust on the ruins of lives that have suffered the abuse of people in general and men in particular, as well as institutions in general and the Churches in particular.

Popular religion may be unorthodox but is not entirely privatized. Among homeless people it is, however, an expression of interiority, not to say withdrawal. But it is also social: many women do go to church (or churches) eclectically, and with others, as well as loyally and alone.

They are not “smorgasbord Christians” in the usual sense of the phrase: they are not looking, however unconsciously, for an easy life, but for meaning, survival, and an injection of hope. Their starting point, almost literally, is the gutter. But their hope is survival and their survival is their hope. It is quite amazing how much hope they have.

COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Recently, in these pages, Elizabeth Johnson (1999) wrote that

the communion of saints comprises all living persons of truth and love. While the term itself springs from the experience of grace within the Christian church, divine blessing cannot be limited to this circle. *Within human cultures everywhere* the Spirit calls persons to seek truth and live in love and justice with others, so that “friends of God and prophets” can be found in every tongue and nation, even among religion’s cultured despisers.

The emphasis is mine; and in addition to the final phrase, could we not add “. . . and [religion’s] despised, forgotten, or merely overlooked”? Because I am very much in agreement with the sentiments expressed in the paragraph quoted above, perhaps I may be permitted to elaborate on them a little, and to extend their implicit reach to cover some of the homeless poor in a more explicit way.

Johnson refers to “human cultures” as the seed bed of the communion of saints. But many people would never think of the homeless population as qualifying as a human culture. That, of course, would be “their problem”—except that to deny culture to homeless people would also be to victimize them even more! However, Johnson includes “all living persons of faith and love”; and even if the homeless poor were to be denied participation in culture, they most certainly cannot be excluded from “all living persons of faith and love”: among them are many exemplars of these theological virtues. Which brings us unavoidably to the question: what are the implications for the rest of us, if the communion of saints includes homeless people? Am I my brothers’ and sisters’ keeper? If, as Johnson argues, the communion of saints is not only a helpful theological and ecclesial notion but a description of people of faith, does it not follow that Christian ministry should acknowledge, and respond to the needs of, those whose faith is fiercely strong, whose hope springs eternal, but whose religion is either invisible or unorthodox? The major issue here, I suggest, is not so much about how we open our doors to the lost and the strayed, as how, and when, and where we actually go forth into the “highways and byways,” to encounter, embrace, and offer healing and hospitality, as Jesus did.

POPULAR PIETY

So where *is* the religion of people—or popular religion—when it is not expressed in official, orthodox forms and in our churches and canonical parishes? And in what does the challenge to ministers with a missionary heart consist? Let us briefly listen to the actual words of women of faith who are currently homeless in the United States. Let us look at their piety, from their own perspective and in their own words, as part of their “inner history.” Let us note their search for the transcendent, their indomitable hope, and, perhaps surprisingly for people so abused or overlooked, their tolerance and even altruism: something very Godly is palpably part of their lives. As Pope Paul VI put it, in lines already quoted we have to pay attention to *actual people, the questions they ask*, and the impact of the gospel on *their concrete life* (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.63). Here then, are half a dozen personal testimonies, taken at random from many:

- “God’s been holding me up. He’s been real good to me, not letting me break down and going back to drugs and alcohol, waking me up in the morning, making me close my eyes at night, keeping me where I can keep the faith, and away from drugs and alcohol. . . . I read the Bible a lot. . . . A lot of church people have done things I don’t think church people should do or even think that way. That would not make me confide in them. . . . I got angry at God when he took my Mom, and I did used to blame God for my life. But I’m not against God. My faith is growing stronger. I got hope, Tony. . . . I do Bible study twice a week (at the Baptist church). We take a passage and discuss it” (Tina).
- “I believe in God, I do. I pray every night before I go to sleep. If I do good or bad, right or wrong, I pray for another day. And every day I wake up I thank God for another day. . . . Blame God for the position I’m in? Why? I can’t blame God. . . . I have abandoned the Church many times, but I need God in my life, a spiritual guide and spiritual awareness” (Jeannette).
- “I cried for two days. It’s really scary. But I had my faith. I kept my head up. I believe in God very seriously. And God kept me going. I just prayed and talked to God every day. There were times I wanted to give up, but God had business. . . . Sometimes I sit down in a corner by myself. . . . I read the Bible. . . . I want to die a happy death, and I know I’m going to live forever in Paradise” (Lunette).
- “I been baptized five or six times; because I’m a backslider. Different churches. I pray to God; God is in my heart; I believe in the Lord. But yesterday was the first time I’ve been in church for ten years. I do

think that God loves me. I know God works in mysterious ways. He's there for me; I still have faith; I choose not to give up" (Brenda).

- "God's been there all the time, even though I wasn't going to church. I would pray at home. God is the reason for my life. He's the reason for my breathing. And nothin's impossible. . . . I can't describe God, but I think He's caring, understanding, forgiving. I've read the Bible. . . . God's always been there, in everything I've done. He's helped me. He got my ID, my birth certificate. He woke me up in order to give me strength and energy to go look for them. I never give up. Not on God, no! . . . I'd go to church if someone went with me. I wouldn't go by myself. . . . church people: they say things, then they do the opposite. I never went to church for help or assistance. . . . I shouldn't have to go [to a special place] to worship. I could be here, or in the hallway. God sees everything you do, and what you do to other people, He knows" (Darla).
- "God, for me, is . . . my intuition; something eating at me. After my Mom died, I strayed from the Church. . . . I don't understand the Bible. . . . God is real! He's blessing me a lot. I used to be angry with God because I saw many people with material blessings. But one thing I have come to recognize is the blessing of my health. . . . Jesus? I don't have a term or definition for Jesus. It's as if the Spirit moves within me. God is real. Jesus is the son of God, but it's not as if he's the same. . . . The Church? Church people to me are hypocrites and phony. I would like to try a church; Church itself is OK" (Ranita).

CONCLUSION

Jesus said to his disciples, "ask, seek, knock" (Matt 7:7-8). But those who have all the answers simply do not stop to ask; those who are not lost have no reason to seek; and those secure within their own comfortable domain would never think to knock. These three imperatives then, apply to inquirers, searchers, or outsiders. An institution that believes itself to have all the answers, to have reached its goal, and to reside at the center, will tend, at best—as will its like-minded members—to invite others to the center but not to move to the margins itself. But the homeless poor actually live at the margins, and they either fail to hear, or fail to be convinced by the invitations. So they continue to struggle for survival, to fashion a world of meaning in the face of chaos and confusion, and to eke out their existence on the very edges of the institutional Church.

It is surely time, as we reflect on the meaning and challenge of the third Christian millennium, to commit ourselves to a new evangelization that begins by seeking out the invisible and excluded, not, of course, to herd them into institutional corrals and brand them, like livestock,

with baptism, but to dedicate ourselves to their service, by learning their inner history, by being open to and awed by the resilience of their spirit, and by treating the homeless poor in our land as Jesus treated the outcasts and the indigent in his.

Both *Evangelii nuntiandi* and the recent pontifical document on culture have articulated the challenge of evangelization quite well. It remains for us to incarnate a Jesus-response, in the spirit of Luke 4:18.

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