

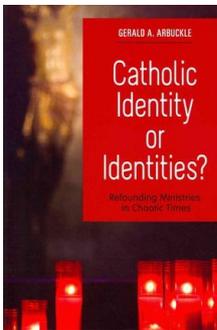
IDENTITY AND ETHOS: STORIES THAT MATTER

Tim Williams CM

June 30, 2014

The Question

As Catholic Institutions and organizations change their form of governance from being run by Religious Congregations to using Boards of Directors and Chief Executive Officers, with some or even many employees not being of the Catholic Tradition or perhaps not following any Faith Tradition at all, the issue of the Catholic identity of these institutions is often raised. It is soon realised, at least by committed Trustees, Directors and CEOs, and many employees at different levels, that a corporate or business model of administration is not enough. How is a Catholic identity to be retained when the driving force of the ethos of an institution is no longer a Religious Congregation which is directly in charge of the administration of the institution ? And how is the particular ethos of the Religious Congregation to be preserved within that identity ?



Gerry Arbuckle SM tackles this matter from a sociological and anthropological point of view in his book *Catholic Identity or Identities ? Refounding Ministries in Chaotic Times*.¹ In this book he argues that it is time to acknowledge that the programs and processes used in the past for retaining identity are inadequate for our postmodern age. Instead, he provides a model for returning to the practice of storytelling, grounded in the teachings of Jesus as a way of evangelizing, and of forming staffs in Catholic Institutions. But first, he sees a problem with what we actually mean now by the term "Catholic identity".

Individual Catholic Identities

Arbuckle observes that since the time of Vatican II, there are many identity types to be found in our Church. These types range from those who are baptised but go no further in their Catholic allegiance to those who are devoted to Mass and Vatican II theology with a strong spiritual life focused on the Easter Mystery and a yearning for deep renewal and refounding of the Church. In between are those with various Catholic identities which may be blurred and which are found in a variety of combinations.

Because of the plurality of identities in a Catholic institution's staff, the decreasing number of members of Religious Congregations involved, and the changing demands from governments and society, Arbuckle argues that there will be uncertainty in the ministries of those involved in Catholic institutions. He regards the fundamental tension that will arise as

¹ Arbuckle SM, Gerald A., *Catholic Identity or Identities ? - Refounding Ministries in Chaotic Times*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota USA, 2013.

being the tension between "the mission" and "the business". When the emphasis is too strongly on "the business" or the corporate structure, the uniqueness of the Catholic mission will suffer, and so there is a need to refound Catholic identities in the ministries of institutions. The uniqueness of the ethos of any Religious Congregation present in the institution will also suffer and may also need to be included in the refounding of the institution's identity.

So how is all this to be addressed ?

Refounding Identities of Institutions

The term "chaos" is used by Arbuckle to refer to the confusion that arises when the way we do things is no longer seen to be relevant to the context in which we live and work. He regards this chaos as the necessary precondition for innovative change involving the identity of the institution even to the extent of refounding the institution's identity. He suggests that refounding the identity of the institution, which may include the ethos of a Religious Congregation, cannot be achieved solely by a didactic (deductive - "from the top down") process, that is by imposing an identity from above as the Church has often done in the past. Rather, refounding of the identity or ethos needs to take place through an inductive process such as retelling or rearticulating the myths of foundation, and applying these myths to present situations.

Story telling - Myths and Narratives

For the purposes of refounding an institution's identity, Arbuckle proposes that the inductive or "from the bottom up" approach can make use of two types of story telling - Myths and Narratives - especially those which relate to values and beliefs.

Myths are all those stories that make sense out of the past and show the values and beliefs held by the founders. In the case of Christianity and Catholicism, these will include Gospel stories, parables, and significant events. It will also include stories and events from the Old and New Testaments and from Church History. For example, for a healthcare institution, the story of the Good Samaritan would be one of the many foundational stories that could be told relating to values and beliefs. For refounding the ethos of a Religious Congregation in an institution, stories of the founders and other iconic figures and events in the particular Congregation that show the important values and beliefs of the Congregation would be used.

Narratives are those stories about people and events which apply the values and beliefs of the myths to the present time. Examples would be stories in such reflection articles as *Violence on a Sydney Train*² (where some young people demonstrated Gospel value) or *On being Evangelised*³ (the story of Jane, who indicated she had left the Church - or had she ?). (Apologies for using my own reflections as examples !). Another example would be stories

² Williams CM, T, *Violence on a Sydney Train*, March 3, 2014. Accessed on the website of the Congregation of the Mission (Province of Oceania) June 11, 2014 at:

<http://vincentians.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Violence-on-a-Sydney-Train.pdf>

³ Williams CM, T, *On Being Evangelized*, September 14, 2012. Accessed on the website of the Congregation of the Mission (Province of Oceania) June 11, 2014 at:

<http://vincentians.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ON-BEING-EVANGELIZED.pdf>

as to how Pope Francis has demonstrated the values and beliefs of the Church simply by his way of acting in public.

Myths and Narratives can be told formally in an organised way, or informally in casual gatherings. They can also be passed on by the way people act, and by events that occur. While the responsibility for this might lie formally with the directors and the CEO, there is no reason why others cannot fill this role as well. Those who are really gifted in this area, as well as in imagination and creativity, can indeed be refounding persons.

But what about Church Teaching and all that?

Church Teaching and Doctrine are important for those who are committed to a particular Tradition. But when we are involved with mixed groups of people some of whom may be committed Catholics and some of whom may have no real connection with the Church or even Christianity, then Church Teaching and Doctrine are not the first or most important things to be attended to. People are evangelized in their own context and history, not where we would like them to be ! Discussion of Church Teaching and Doctrine can come when and if people are ready and willing to be involved in this.

Summing up

The withdrawal of Religious Congregations from Catholic Institutions, the variety of individual Catholic identities present now and the demands of government and society have all affected Catholic identity in these institutions, A business or corporate model can provide suitable structure and organisation along with the good practices and compliance that are part of the requirements of modern day society. However, the "mission" of the Gospel is lacking if Catholic identity and the ethos of the Religious Congregation are not intentionally a focus. The suggestion is that story - both myth and narrative - are a way of addressing the issue of Catholic identity. None of this should be left to chance.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some of the myths (foundational stories) of Christianity, and of the Vincentian Family, which could be used in story telling ? What values and beliefs are being passed on in these myths ?
2. What are some narratives (applications of these myths) that could be related to those for whom and with whom we work in ministry ? What values and beliefs are being passed on in these narratives ?
