NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Transforming Catholic school contracts' morality clauses in a time of Pentecost

Jocelyn A. Sideco | Jun. 12, 2014 Young Voices

The school I have the privilege of working for found itself in the middle of upsetting and uncomfortable debates [1] concerning our teacher contracts and our relationship with the Oakland, Calif., diocese. So many good people have been a part of this inherent tension personified in the Roman Catholic church. How are we, a dignified people made in the image and likeness of God, navigating between two political realities -- the Roman Catholic church and its magisterium and American democracy and its economic system of capitalism?

One of my colleagues called me a cruise director when she experienced my ministry as personable, thoughtful, patient and hopeful. Although I cringed at the seeming shallowness of this image, I attempt to plunge into the role of a hospitable friend reaching out to those who want welcome and introducing them to those already enjoying God's assurance.

The new contract language puts an explicitness on who teachers are, both in their personal and professional lives. "In both the EMPLOYEE'S personal and professional life, the EMPLOYEE is expected to model and promote behavior in conformity with the teaching of the Roman Catholic faith in matters of faith and morals, and to do nothing that tends to bring discredit to the SCHOOL or to the Diocese of Oakland" (emphasis in original).

In all honesty, I signed my contract. I trusted my own formation in the faith, the development of my conscience and the understanding of ecclesial diversity. I signed this contract knowing full well that religion teachers may be the first on the chopping block in times of conservatism or downsizing to essentials.

But I continue to pray about the word "conformity" that has been placed in this new philosophical paragraph. Conformity in the Bay Area means expressing who you are as a person committed to the sustainability of relationships and of our environment. Bumper stickers read "Coexist," "Make art not war," "Everything is connected," "Save the Bay, "eARTh," "Dissent is the highest form of patriotism," and "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Conformity in the Roman Catholic church looks like "don't ask, don't tell" when it comes to issues of tension, opposition or complexity. It sounds like "And also with you" and looks like smaller groups of people who can share values and prayer styles. Conforming in the Roman Catholic church looks like driving to your most comfortable parish because you like the preaching or the music or their fair trade coffee.

For me, I drive a hybrid, try to compost even when my county doesn't supply me with a bin, and work at being mindful of how I am present to others each day. And I tell people that I have a call to the Roman Catholic priesthood whenever it makes sense in our relationships. My students know because it underscores their experience of me as a person committed to faith and committed to them. My retreatants and spiritual directees know because the sacramental piece of prayer, reconciliation and communion plague their own search for truth and experience of the holy. So despite the fact that Pope Francis tells the hierarchy that we cannot talk about the issue of women's ordination, I cannot live in a community denying my very own call from Christ.

My expression of faith as a model of the Roman Catholic church living in the very situated-ness of Oakland and the Bay Area involve the three-fold embodiment of inform-ity, conform-ity and transform-ity.

I can agree with the church that informing our consciences with Scripture and tradition is critical for understanding how we are to live as moral beings. We are all loved sinners, and our rich story of how to love ourselves and our neighbors in the context of community ought to shed light on how we are to respect and care for one another.

Conforming to church teaching is complicated. If Galileo had conformed to the truth that the church held while he was uncovering the path of the Earth around the sun, where would we be today? Conformity as it denies truth is limiting, harmful and dangerous. Conformity in an effort to stand up against evil or wage a voice for justice so that God's anawim are cared for seems the more pressing efforts of worldwide communion.

Pope Francis demonstrates a way in which we are all invited to conform to the ways of peace and joy. In a recent phone call with young adults on pilgrimage, Pope Francis said [2], "Don't let yourselves be discouraged by failure or anxiousness that wants to remove your dreams, that wants to close you into its dark mentality rather than letting you fly in the light of hope. ... You know that faith is not an inheritance that we receive from others, faith is not a product that one buys, but is a response of love that we live freely and we build daily with patience, through success and failure."

In this sense, I can definitely conform to the Easter joy of the Gospel. I can continue to share my light with others. It is the conformity to an underdeveloped understanding of the human person and our relationality that causes my practice of faith and intellect to flinch, pause, hesitate.

Lastly, my very call as a believer in a God of love, justice, and mercy leads me to stand and move in a place of transform-ity. The celebration and season of Pentecost reminds me that many things were said about the kin-dom and all was heard through the very ears of our culture and situated-ness. There was no one way of hearing God's spirit; there were multiple. My practice of transform-ity is a bit scary at times because I cannot always depend on the past or the hope of the future. I can only accept the present -- Jesus in the tomb, recognizable only as a gardener at first, or Jesus breathing peace in the frightening place of danger, personal harm and insecurity.

Transform-ity is the spirit in which I sign my contract. That my faith -- not stagnant and stale, but alive and fruitful -- is discerning, loving and hopeful. In matters of faith and morals, may my own vocation as a follower of Christ instruct me to be charitable, generous and always justice-oriented.

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