

*Just Practising: A Response to:
Michael Warren's At This Time in This Place: The Spirit Embodied in the Local
Assembly.*

Michael Warren's book is an essay on 'practice'. If a local church is not touching people religiously, that is engaging them in the practice of the gospel, then something seriously wrong has happened to it; its vitality has disappeared. For a community that claims to be religious, shared beliefs are not enough. It is shared practices that are the grounds for shared beliefs, not the other way about.

Warren's thesis is that the true measure of the success of a local Christian assembly is whether it practises true discipleship or not. The local church is a 'discipling assembly' or it is a failure. And to be a discipling assembly it has to practise discipleship in the situation that *this* church finds itself in *now* (my italics). Discipleship has to be inculcated.

Warren emphasises this by defining catechesis as *a ministry to the practice* of the community's understandings (his italics). Catechesis is mutual formation in the practice of the gospel. It is Christians living out their discipleship in the here and now. Living the Christian life and sharing it with others occur only in the concrete. And if the church acts in such a way that its liturgy for example, becomes cut off from the reality of these people, both those in the local assembly and those who surround it, then the church will die.

There is urgency in Warren's prose, and in his ideas. The world is strewn with pyramids, temples and other monuments to religions that have died because they became remote from their people. In faith Christians believe that Jesus is with them always and that their church cannot fail, but that is speaking of the whole church. Local churches have no such guarantee. The world is also strewn with dioceses that exist only as the titular sees of bishops who have never visited them. Australia, which has had Christianity for only two hundred years already has churches that have failed and are now boutique shops, private dwellings and the like, and large novitiate buildings now the demesne of Hare Krishna devotees, the hospitality industry and other pursuits that have little to do with Christian worship or discipling.

Warren is talking of local worshipping communities but much of what he says applies to Catholic and other religious schools. Of course Catholic schools are not only for catechesis as Warren defines it but they can exist, in the long

run, only if they are based in a worshipping community and only if discipleship enthuses many of their teachers and at least some of their students.

The problem for local assemblies, schools and worshipping communities alike, is that practice does not come naturally or easily. Fidelity to God's call has always been a source of dilemmas. In the days when there was a strong Catholic subculture in Australia the dilemmas seemed fewer because people had so many social reasons for being in church and for practising their religion. Now they do not.

So what do we do if conducting religious schools or being part of a worshipping assembly is what we are called to do?

We all know Christians who are good and thinking people and yet get little spiritual nourishment from their local church. We all have students, at school and university who find the local church community has ceased to be the place they naturally think of when they want to be spiritually nourished. And among those who want to be nourished by a worshipping assembly there are many who are talented and trained to take part in the life of the church and are excluded from using their talents and training.

There are so many people who have opened themselves to the Spirit and continued to develop their lives yet have no voice in the church. Many, dis-spirited have walked away. And, alas, we all know people who have been exposed to Christian discipling in Catholic schools and it seems to have had no affect.

But while many of these people no longer attend Eucharist regularly or seem to be part of the Christian assembly they still send their children to Catholic schools. For many of these the school is the closest they get to a worshipping assembly. For some it is *the school as worshipping assembly* that they approach in times of need.

For example, a number of religious education teachers that I know have been approached to conduct funerals, to support grieving families, to be the religious presence when religion or spirituality are seen or felt to be the appropriate response to a situation in parents' or students' lives. I know teachers who have been asked if they could conduct

weddings for former pupils and baptisms for their children. For many involved however peripherally in a religious school, the school is their local assembly.

The role of school as local assembly therefore, is worth a lot of thought, and Michael Warren's book is one of the sources of the theory to give this discussion substance. Those working to enliven assemblies and researchers in this area will find lots of leads to follow in Warren's work.

John Dewey observes, in *Democracy and Education* that unless a community can enthuse its young in what it believes and practises then the community will cease to exist. Schools at their best are good at enthusing the young in what the community believes and does. It is one of a teacher's main tasks.

The 'young' that the school ministers to includes children and their parents as well as staff. The religious school might be the only 'discipling assembly' that some people ever contact. 'You might be the only book on Jesus Christ that some people ever read', the poster used proclaim. And for some, for the time being the religious school is the only 'discipling assembly' they know. It can be the place where their discipleship begins. So what do religious school teachers do about it?

In the Victor Couch Lecture delivered at Australian Catholic University on November 26th, 2001, Br Gerard Rummery spoke of the founders of the De La Salle Institute, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and of why, when they began in the seventeenth century, they chose to call themselves 'brothers'. It was a conscious decision by these men. They called themselves brothers because they lived in community and wanted to be brothers to each other. But they were also schoolteachers who wanted to be brothers to the boys they taught. They wanted to be called 'Brother' rather than 'Sir' by their students and they insisted on calling each of the students by his Christian name, as brothers do. Maybe they should have gone a step further and called their pupils 'Brother' as well!

Gerard Rummery proposed that today in Catholic schools teachers, even though they are mostly not living in religious communities like the religious orders, might see themselves as brothers and sisters to their students. A member of the audience at the lecture added that as so many children now do not have siblings, teachers being a brother or sister to their students might be more than ever appropriate.

Thanks to the Brothers and Sisters who conducted Catholic schools in this country for about a hundred years of our Catholic education endeavour, mostly in a brotherly and sisterly way, we already know

that being a Christian is supposed to make a difference to the way we live. Those of us old enough to have experienced the schools run by the religious knew that it was all about practice. They were not always good and we were not but we did know what 'good' was supposed to look like. But some practices that were appropriate then are not so now. And, appropriate or not, some of the practices of those days are impossible to even initiate, let alone maintain.

Warren is less specific in his examples but, like Rummery, provides some guidelines for practical discipleship in an assembly. He stresses that the word *assembly* is critical to our discussion. A Christian assembly is a community made up of agents, not objects. Agents are deeply involved in their own lives, not acted upon as objects are. There is no room for an audience in the Christian assembly, as Kierkegaard noted. In the Christian life the only audience is God. The rest of us have to be participants.

I have already claimed that this is why so many leave the church, that they are not allowed to act as agents. Their participation is not wanted. Rather they are expected to sit still and do as they are told. Christian schools cannot make this mistake. Christian schools have to enable all their students, teachers and parents be participants. They start by taking each of their stories or narratives seriously.

Stanley Hauerwas, Christian ethicist and theologian is quoted by Warren as pointing out that our decisions are made in the narrative of our lives. Humans make moral choices that make sense in terms of their own life story. Hauerwas claims that all of our notions are narrative dependent. For the assembly this means that the members have to take their community's narrative and that of each person in it seriously. That is the point of Warren's title, *At this time, in this place*. No one can be a disciple in the abstract. And every disaffected Christian who has ever said, 'But you don't know how I am feeling,' knows that. Religion abstracted from anyone's here and now alienates them. It does not make disciples.

Warren uses moralising as an example. Moralising, where one person or institution seeks to prescribe or proscribe behaviour for another from outside their horizon, is just one form of abstract religion that alienates those who are its object. Moralising is an inappropriate way of teaching discipleship. Moral education, a different process altogether involves humans in facing the dilemma of multiple acceptable choices in concrete circumstances.

Of course true moral education is a threat to those in authority. To be open to a community of agents is to have 'a genuine sensitivity to the presence and

work of the Spirit among all the faithful', but it is not a way to personal power. It demands instead surrender to the working of God in the world, and so it is frightening. What if God asks, through the community, something I cannot bring myself to say yes to?

But Christians have a model in Jesus. Warren speaks of Jesus' imagination of human possibilities. And he believes that Jesus had a broad view of what we other humans are capable of, for good and for bad. Jesus was not narrow nor did he seek power. He was about creating agents, not audiences, by being appreciative and discerning when dealing with people. The kind of religious judgment that Jesus had, Warren says, was able to applaud what fostered human growth while it was still able to discern good from bad. This is the kind of religious wisdom we need our selves, and which we are called to develop in our students.

This is the kind of moral judgment that knows the place of tentative judgment when either the norms or the situations being judged are unclear. This kind of approach to morality grasps the value of stating judgments in ways that foster dialogue with other points of view. It realises the necessity in the assembly of those who critique and judge the life of the community. Part of our role as educators of the assembly then, is to provide a milieu in which people like this grow and feel appreciated.

This is an example of what Robert Young, in *A Critical Theory of Education*, describes as 'critical education'. That is, a 'mature capacity to deal with doubt and to hold to one's beliefs without absolutising them or abandoning all warranted assertion in the face of nihilism and relativism'. Assemblies of their nature deal with doubt while holding to what is foundational to their beliefs. By struggling through doubt they learn how to survive and flourish.

For Warren the task for each individual Christian within the assembly is struggling for a living discipleship in each one's particular circumstances. He notes that the point of meeting as Christians is our belief that the Spirit of Jesus becomes accessible through those who gather in his name. In our assemblies we are struggling to make actual Jesus' reimagination of what it means to be a human being. Surely this is also the task of religious schools.

As Warren notes, we can communicate a coherent vision of Christian faith to any person who will stay long enough to hear it. But the communication of *the way of being a Christian* and the embracing of that way for oneself are quite another matter. This is the point those De La Salle founders were

making. Communicating the way of being Christian is a matter of practice. So what we do, what we say, what we look like, what metaphors we use and acknowledge, how we engage each other in this time and place, these are the issues.

The question we ask constantly to see if our practice is life giving is, 'Does our way square with our say?' Religion is not just a way of thinking. It is pre-eminently a way of being. Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris observes, 'Saying that Jesus is the medium of salvation requires that those who say it display the fruits of liberation'. The saying attributed to Nietzsche, 'I would believe you Christians if only you looked redeemed', says the same thing.

In August 1975 Gerard Rummery, then editor of *Our Apostolate*, the journal that became *Journal of Religious Education*, translated from the French an article by Jacques Audinet, 'Catechesis: the church building the church within a given culture'. It is an article worth revisiting in the light of Warren's book. In it Audinet states that catechesis,

is always localised and particularised. It is, at a given time, in a given society, the act by which the Church community attempts to give the message she bears, with the help of the very means which the culture of that society offers.

In the years since religious educators and others in Australia have argued about what catechesis means and whether using the word at all does anything to help us know what we should be doing in religious schools. Warren's book gives new life to this discussion.

What we do in Religious education lessons in religious schools may not always, or often be catechesis. But if religious schools are to be in any serious way a part of the local church they have to be, in the ways they go about their daily lives, a ministry to the practice of the community's understandings. They have to create and enable participants for the local church. To do that they have to live constantly in the here and now.

References

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