

In Conversation with ...

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# What to do with Difference?

*Coming to terms  
with the changing  
cultural scene in  
which we do  
pastoral ministry*

Difference is *cool*. At least that is what advertising media seems to say. Hewlett Packard touts its new customizable laptop with the tagline: “the computer is personal again.” There are on sale a multitude of skins and layouts that differentiate our iPods, mobile phones, and PDAs from others. Mass production has given way to an infinite variety of unique consumables specially designed for the customer to define himself or herself as an individual who breaks away from social convention.

Our commercial world rewards being different in entrepreneurship: originality, creativity, the ability to think outside the box. Values like loyalty to the firm and honest work ethic are no longer enough to give enterprising companies the all important ‘competitive edge.’ Workers need to make radical choices and so be noticed in order to flourish in Singapore’s fast-paced economy. Difference is not only cool, it is *necessary*.

Turning to the academy, we witness the intellectual development on post-modernity and post-structuralism celebrating difference and proclaiming the demise of overarching theories of social organization. For postmodern thinkers difference is generated by the individuating subject in an act of autonomous self-definition, it is a mark of maturity in thought. Sameness is oppressive and thus undesirable – difference is not only necessary, difference is *normal*.

A world view

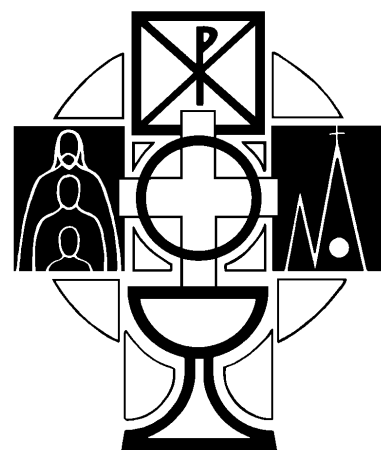
emphasizing plurality and difference raises concerns among those who have an interest in maintaining commonness. In the area of global peace, there is insecurity that irreconcilable differences between ethnicities make imminent a “Clash of Civilizations.”<sup>ii</sup> Religious groups, feeling their way of life eroded by pluralist culture, react by moving towards a ‘purification of tradition’ by reasserting religious identity through fundamentalist and exclusivist means. Faced with many other contesting voices that offer different systems of morality or meaning, there is a tendency for religious groups to turn inward in redefining themselves against others who are different – the perspective that all views are valid is rejected. There needs to be a stronger “us” to counter the multiplicity of the adversarial “them.”

Pluralism and its attendant risks, what Benedict XVI cautions as “the dictatorship of relativism”,

also affect the internal life within faith traditions.<sup>iii</sup> Our recent diocesan census indicated that a quarter of Catholic churchgoers, mostly highly educated, see no connection between Christ’s teachings and the life they lead outside of church.<sup>iv</sup> In this age of difference, religion is a private and non-communal affair where each relates to the divine in their own way. It is entirely plausible to have in our congregations people who ascribe to highly customized personal forms of religious practice; a fusion perhaps of Catholic worship, Hindu cosmology, Buddhist morality, and secular humanism. Sitting in our pews are Mass-going-Brahman-believing-Nirvana-seeking-members of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. While this caricature involves a stretch of the imagination it nonetheless illustrates the issue at hand: different choices enable people to select a privatized religion tailor-made for their personal lifestyle and milieu.

Our usual response to emerging difference is either to dismiss it forcefully,<sup>v</sup> or to divert attention away from its troublesome presence by exhorting unity. Neither approach is a long term strategy.

When we assume that people remain unchanged in their perception of Catholicism; that they will continue coming to church and conforming to the tenets, we make the implicit refusal that socio-cultural forces are significant to religion. When we eventually recognize the need to bite-the-bullet and deal with the situation, temptation to abdicate the problem solving to the younger generation of pastors becomes all too strong.



Admitting a pluralist context in which ministry takes place needs to happen even if it involves a lot of subsequent work. For starters we would need to theologially renegotiate what constitutes communion in this new context. We would have to shape a positive attitude towards the presence of other voices offering meaning to people and form new relationships with these based on dialogue. Our leadership style would have to be reassessed in the light of other religious and non-religious forms of leadership. Catechesis would require renewal to educate Catholics to operate in this new multi-faceted and dynamic environment. And this is only the beginning. New understandings for evangelization, faith education, worship, and missionary activity need to be articulated in order for the Church to minister in a world where people no longer accept absolute truth as taken for granted.

- i. For an introduction to postmodernism see Barry Burke, "Postmodernism & Postmodernity," Encyclopedia of Informal Education, [www.infed.org/biblio/b-postmd.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-postmd.htm) Last accessed 8 April 2008.
- ii. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- iii. Homily delivered to the College of Cardinals, 18 April 2005.
- iv. Catholic Census 2007, Table 4.1a.
- v. Cf. the debate over admission of the Gentiles, Acts 15, or Pius IX, "Syllabus of Errors," 1864.



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