

Chicago Centrum

Temple Plenary

4/4/74

PROFOUND FUNCTION OF PRIORSHIP

I had been called a prior for several years before I was ever sent to a Religious House. But something in the existential situation of being sent out to a Religious House revealed the blankness of my mind. I did not know a thing about Priorship.

Perhaps you had the same experience when your name first appeared at the top of an assignment chart. Those fears and anxieties are themselves the beginning of priorship. Priorship is always a worry about this, a worry about that; about yourself, about your colleagues. It never stops at your own assignments, but that is where it often begins. Priorship starts with a depth caring about the past, the future and what is going to take place now.

This is actually two separate, but combined lectures. One deals headon with the profound function of priorship and the other deals with methods. In the final analysis, these are inseparable. One cannot isolate the style of priorship from its methods and practice. They may be drawn together without distortion.

First of all, trust the methods we know. Practice all the methodologies we have been hammering out for years. We have wisdom, which is not to say that every one of us executes each method with precision, nor are we practicing the methods every moment of our lives. Priorship is always humiliating, for we always find ourselves not putting into practice what we know about life. The practices of priorship are to actualize the intellectual, social and spirit methods we have developed over the past years. The profound function is to know that times three methods are the way of history itself. That is, history rides on the back of our capacity to reflect deeply on life; it rides on the back of those people who catalyze others to engage in society; it rides on the back of those who can breathe spirit and awe into every situation. This is what it means to say that the Religious are essential to humanness.

All of the functions of priorship can be grounded in one particular task of a prior: getting people, as well as himself, out of bed. As the Solitary Office we used in Summer '73 revealed, history usually undergoes change during the gettingupinthemorning time of life. The first three thoughts of every person shape his day; and to expand that to the world, the first three thoughts of every person in civilization shapes each day of history.

The issue of getting people out of bed has been perennially frustrating. There have always been those persons who call it professionally will not get up. One Academy, there was a woman who refused to get up morning after morning. One of the older staff members sent a younger staffer up to the woman and told him, "Go upstairs and tell that woman I am going to have her arrested if she does not get out of bed." The newer staff member did not for a moment doubt him and went upstairs to the woman and said, "He is going to get the police after you if you don't get out of bed." That is the profound function of being in history through priorship.

The incident is more than a funny story. It represents an intellectual method in that an awareness was initiated from one human being to the next human being. It was also a sociological method, for it induced

a happening--someone got out of bed. Finally, it dealt with an individual decision about a human being. That is a depth happening and therefore, a spirit method. The weaving together of intellectual, social and spirit methods into a whole is what priorship is all about.

Priorship is a life dynamic. History does not happen by chance. History happens by occasioning situations in which people who need to make decisions about their lives push to some real awareness, casting aside all their moorings about the future. History rides on its own time. Priors are the ones who decide to enact history in daily life.

Priorship is the human activity. The prior is the new man, the new humanness of our time. There is a tendency, when looking at the crumbling away of the clergy in the past fifty years, to think of the Religious as second rate. That is not true. The Religious profession actually performs history. In fact, even now while we are not exactly sure about what we are doing, we perform history. What the Religious in history indicate is that life is filled with wonder.

Priorship happens whether we enact the role of prior as we need to or not. That became very clear when I lived in a Religious House. Sometimes, the priorship dynamic does not happen through designated priors. Sometimes, the priorship dynamic survives on what happens to threeyearolds. Have you noticed how three-year-olds have a fantastic capacity to enable one to reflect deeply about life? They enact intellectual methods when they get stubborn; they enact social methods when they stop fantastic collegium meetings just by kicking and screaming down the hall; and they enact spirit methods. They can evoke new decisions about life by leading someone in to the depths. Whether you enact it or not, the priorship dynamic either in a healthy or perverted form, will be going on in every Religious House every day, every hour, every moment.

The prior also plays the roles of pedagogue, social engineer and spirit guru. I want to push the function of knowing those methods, of getting them into your being. Reading manuals and papers will help teach you the methods, but we often tend to forget how it is they get into our beings. That is the key to priorship. A prior embodies and breathes the methods until they ooze out of his being whether he wants them to or not. He embodies them in his life.

Pedagogy has again become an urgent issue. We have fallen into a number of perversions in pedagogy and must say "NO" to them. Pedagogy is simply the guiding of individuals or groups of people into the depths of life. The question is: How does one acquire the skill, the finesse, and the ability to be a pedagogue in every life situation? A pedagogue always embodies pedagogy in life. He brings objectivity to the situation of our lives. Our fourstep method for pedagogy is the iron pillar of both pedagogy and all of our methods. The pedagogue raises the objective question, the reflective question, the interpretive question, and the decision about the interpretation. Once the fourstep method is woven into one's being, everything he does comes out of those questions. All of our newer methods are based on the four-step method for dealing with people at the center of life, for the objective, reflective, interpretive and decisional dimensions are forever present. Why, even when the fire inspector comes at the beginning of every summer program we employ the four-step method. Someone rushes in saying, "The fire inspector is coming, the fire inspector is coming." Then someone will be assigned to take him around and the first question the guide will ask is, "What fire inspector? When was he last here? Who spoke with him last?" Those objective questions immediately objectify the panic. Objectifying a situation is the role of a pedagogue.

The pedagogical method is a life method. Our greatest perversion in pedagogy is "pedagoguing," or overdoing the pedagogical role, or starting at the interpretive level. There is a great temptation, especially among us older hands, to decide exactly what needs to be done about fire inspectors or anything else. We start with, "Well, this is what needs to be done," and go about enacting our decision. Have you noticed

how often this method backfires?

Or, in attempting to get someone out of bed, to begin with the interpretive or, "You are a slob, get out of bed!" is not very helpful in motivating a person to make a new decision.

Charting is simply a fantastic method. It goes beyond the studying of papers and can take place in all kinds of situations. A Galaxy pastor tells the story of a man who would telephone him every week just to talk for an hour or so. The pastor did not know why this "telephone man" kept calling so one day, he decided to chart the conversation by marking off segments of the conversation as the subject changed. The chart showed him exactly why the fellow kept calling. He was asking something like: "Will you please articulate the vocational question for me today?" Even though the fellow never would phrase the question in that way, the chart gave the pastor a way to grasp what was really going on. To use the charting method is to embody it. That is one hint as to how one begins to embody pedagogy as a life method.

The art form conversation method is also essential. It is a basic pedagogical method which goes on in all pedagogy. The art form method, like charting, is a life dynamic. In the Movement, we use the formal, intellectual methods of the story, the seminar, and the lecture. But as a Prior, you are called on to act in many informal situations as well. Somehow, there is always occasion to reflect on the authenticity of life.

In the area of social methods, the Prior must learn to be a social engineer, a model builder. The reason for acquiring our depth awareness of life is to take it into the fabric of society. The social fabric is not some architectonic structure out beyond; it is a Religious House, it is your family, your colleagues in Tulsa, or in any other social setting. Priors use social methods to bring the spirit dimension into the social fabric. The question for a Prior is: How do I demonstrate sociality in everything I do?

We have come to a point in our journey where we must be sophisticated, sophisticated enough to be appropriate to the context we live in. To put it simply, we must learn to be servants at home. Contradiction analysis is an attempt to try to grasp the situation we find ourselves in and then discern the appropriate method of being that situation. Sophistication is being appropriate consciously using the appropriate dress, style of speaking and so on.

The look of a Religious House is also key to Priorship. One of our stories is that a Religious House must be spic and span at every moment, ready to receive the Bishop. That is true. but we must not forget the methods we live out of. Remember, the dirt in the Religious House is sacred dirt. It speaks of a group of people in the world who are about something other than keeping their house spic and span. Many worthy people in the world keep their houses spic and span. We are not about that. Our method is to do whatever is sociologically appropriate to a particular moment in history. So if dishes must be left sitting in a sink for three hours while we do a critical workshop to prepare for a bishop then that is what we do. Of course, when he is there, the House had better be spic and span too.

We need facility and agility so that in every situation, we are relating appropriately to what is at hand. Once we have embodied these methods, a lot of the complexity we feel on the other side of the turn will probably dissolve.

Contradiction analysis is for spotting contradictions. It is never anyone's subjectivity that is the contradiction. It is never the absence of something that is the block. It is always that which is objectively there. If the contradiction is a lack of high collegiality in a particular team, then the question to be asked is. "Where is that lack of collegiality manifest in that team? Where is the sociological thereness?" Whatever is determined to be the "thereness" is the contradiction. When the contradiction has been determined, one is free to make proposals.

Gridding is another area we must struggle in. It is one thing to have a grid of a region, but a grid alone will not tell what the Region is about. If a regional grid has not been evaluated recently, and you are depending on someone else's grid, you do not know your region. What are the actual sociological dynamics happening in a region? I hope the day never comes when everything is gridded. Certainly, grids cannot be altered every week; if metropolitan regions are to come into being, then grids must be kept essentially the same. But grids also should include areas that are totally unknown. Perhaps we start gridding the moon or Mars once all the parishes are gridded, and we do it with a group of people in a House. A most helpful part of gridding is gridding terrain with people in it. If it is geo-social, then it must have population. Never change your grid but ground the dynamics of gridding into your life. Gridding is a social method which promotes the objective, reflective and interpretive. It objectifies a piece of geography, offering a reflection about what the dynamics of the geography actually are. Gridding demands you make some decision about the future.

Finally, the Prior is out to occasion contextual authenticity, or an authentic relationship to his context. He is out to occasion productiveness and motivity in relating to the Movement and the Church and the World.

As spirit guru, he leads the people with nothing to do into the depths, then leads the people with depth into society. The spirit guru is always taking someone into the Other World. He always takes the stance that life is loveable. He takes everyone's chambers of horrors, everyone's anxieties and favorite cocoons and says, "That is life." Priorship is enabling people to decide to live out of their decisions, and to embody those decisions in their daily lives. The prior knows that every man no matter how shallow he may seem, is deep. Every man has problems he has never pulled beneath and his surface parochialism indicates where he is living life in the deeps. The parochialism indicates his decision about what life really is. Whether or not you agree with him, that is who he is. The question for a prior is, how to get an imaginal technique that enables him to deal with the truth of everyman's depth, problems, parochialisms and decisions through spirit methods.

One way a Prior learns this is to become acquainted with the fact that death is his companion. Death is the one companion he can most trust. There is aloneness in Priorship. It is not long before a Prior discovers he cannot trust his colleagues or his husband or wife. The companion he needs is death-- not death in the abstract--but HIS death. When your death is your constant companion, you can turn to it and ask, "What shall I do here?" "What is really going on?" Death always gives an honest answer. It always makes it clear that you are the one blocking a situation. Neither your emotions or your presuppositions about life will tell you, as a Prior, that you have to like that idiot in the Region who you do not like. Only your Death will tell you that is what is necessary.

A Prior is always about finding ways to enable someone to grasp his depth role, or his relationship to life. Back in 1968, when things were necessarily quiet in 5th City, one colleague kept badgering the Prior assigned to 5th City, saying, "We've got to get out and do something. We have got to get out there and get busy." The Prior said to him, "Have you ever heard the story Buddha told about the fish that flopped out of the lake?" To this day, the colleague has never heard the story but somehow, his whole relationship to life was altered when the Prior asked that seemingly unrelated question.

We have many tools as spirit gurus: the Scripture methods, the Spirit Conversations, the Visits, the Psalms. Our tools are means of dealing with the entire practical memory of man. Yet I underscore that they are tools, something a Prior can use to find ways of getting people out of their intellectual blocks.

The profound function of priorship is the embodiment of these methods. Whenever we get insecure in the methods, we revert to our old ways of living life. As a Prior, the tendency is to revert to the status of Prior. Instead, try the intellectual and spirit methods. There is no situation in which those methods will

not help. It is the methods of Priorship that have revealed Priorship's profound function.

David McCleskey

6/18/74