

PRAYER CORNER

The other day a social worker dropped by my office to chat about an intake call. The issue being raised was whether we would accept back into service a client who had been troubling in the past. The client tended to miss appointments, to not follow through on agreed-upon plans, and was inclined to be a bit difficult making complaints against workers. This was a classic “bad” client that no one really wanted on his or her caseload.



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I think we both knew what the answer had to be, even before the discussion began. We discussed the boundaries that would have to be in place; we talked about who might pick up the client; we went over the supervision and reporting requirements; and we talked about how we would support the worker in extending a welcome to the client. It was a good conversation and we got to where we both knew we needed to go.

Reflecting on this discussion, I think that we were both helped to come to our decision by a shared Christian faith. For me at least, I have come to believe that when Jesus said that He would come to us in the guise of the hungry, thirsty and stranger (Matt. 25:35), He meant that He will also come to us in the guise of our clients, colleagues, families and friends. However, recognizing the face of Jesus in the other is not always easy, particularly in the often conflictual world of social work. It is all too easy to be a Christian in the quiet moments of prayer at the beginning of the day, and a busy, effective social worker for the rest of the day.

This splitting of one’s spiritual self from one’s secular self was a particular interest of the late Karl Rahner. Paraphrasing Rahner, I could say that in order to get in touch with God, I needed to step out of this profane world into the “fane” [the sacred], a holy place, where a true encounter with God is possible. Having met God and the Lord Jesus, I could then return strengthened to contend with the profane

world where my daily grind was far from God. # Using an automobile analogy, it was as if I needed to tank up with spiritual gas to help get me reasonably unscathed through my secular day.

Rahner proposed turning this practice on its head. He proposed that rather than needing to leave the world to find God, we should instead seek God’s presence in our daily encounters in the world. He argued that God’s grace permeates the world, except in those who deliberately and radically cut themselves off from God. Consequently, he challenged us to find God in all things. And having encountered God in our everyday human interactions, we would then allow these encounters to shape our daily prayer and worship.

I have to admit that I find it difficult to find God in the client who misses appointments, in the colleague who is obstructive at meetings, and even in my own human nature. I need a disciplined, intentional way of approaching the world and the re-grounding I get in daily, prayerful contact with the Lord. At the same time, the challenge is there to not separate my faith from my daily life. In a sense, I am called quite explicitly to integrate my faith and my daily life; to avoid having a “spiritual” life that is distinct from my “life” life. (As an aside, I think that this is a necessary prerequisite for the further work of integrating faith with social work practice.)

Seeking God in my daily interactions means having a different mindset when I

meet people; it positions me very differently. In my better moments, I will see God’s goodness, beauty, strength in those I meet, because I will be on the look-out for it. Going back to my original story, I will be on the look-out for God’s grace operating in the difficult, complaining client. Amazingly, I may find it. The barrier is in me, not in the client.

Furthermore, I suspect that I am more likely to find God present when I reflect on those encounters which are troubling, conflictual, where I don’t get my own way, when I am challenged and when it is pointed out that I am wrong. These can be painful moments when my limitations are exposed, but they can also be grace-filled.

So, my prayer as I begin each day is less about loading up with God’s grace and holiness to brace myself for the conflicts and challenges of the coming day, though Lord knows, I feel I need to do this at times. Instead, I pray that through a prayerful relationship with the Lord, I may be open and attentive to Him when He comes in the guise of my colleagues or my clients. Then my day is grace-filled, not because I bring grace to it, but because I am attentive to God’s presence in every encounter of the day.

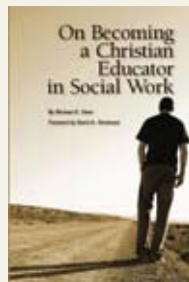
Reference

Rahner, Karl, S.J. (1971) “How to receive a sacrament and mean it.” *Theology Digest* 19:3.

PUBLICATION AVAILABLE FROM NACSW

On Becoming a Christian Educator in Social Work

Michael Sherr (2010) \$19.95 (\$15.95 for NACSW members or for orders of 10 or more). For price in Canadian dollars, use current exchange rate.



On Becoming a Christian Educator is a compelling invitation for social workers of faith in higher education to explore what it means to be a Christian in social work education. By highlighting seven core commitments of Christian social work educators, it offers strategies for social work educators to connect their personal faith journeys to effective teaching practices with their students. Frank B. Raymond, Dean Emeritus at the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina suggests that “Professor Sherr’s book should be on the bookshelf of every social work educator who wants to integrate the Christian faith with classroom teaching. Christian social work educators can learn much from Professor Sherr’s spiritual and vocational journey as they continue their own journeys and seek to integrate faith, learning and practice in their classrooms.”