**Human Dignity–through the Eyes of a Catholic Missionary to Micronesia**

Our Catholic faith

* “Salvation” meant church membership in the past. “Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.” Justification for employment of any means for conversion, even forced conversions. Justification as well for protection of church members, even through extreme forms like the Inquisition, with its burnings at the stake for heresy. In summary, the two important goals were: baptize as many as possible, and protect the church as the vehicle of salvation.
* Eventual recognition that God touches the heart of all people, converted or not. Hence, church membership is not necessarily sign of salvation. Karl Rahner’s “anonymous Christian”–attempt to reconcile old dogma with modern understanding of how God speaks to all.
* Human dignity is grounded in the belief that all humans are created with both the desire and the need to find the divine. In other words, the religious dimension of persons is not just an add-on; it is an essential component of all humans. Isn’t that the real foundation of what we call “human dignity?”
* Consequently, respect for other faith traditions has become easier in our day. Age of ecumenism (not just a feigned fellowship) sprang up. This was based on the recognition that other religions are trying to feed people’s hunger for the divine. If that’s the case, why shouldn’t we consider one another coworkers rather than rivals?

My Experience

* In early 1960s my request for a mission assignment was not based on the fear that Micronesian islanders would be lost in perdition. It was much more founded on the belief that they were our brothers and sisters, and so deserved to be recognized as such. If such was the case, why should they be denied a good education and other spiritual help? (Perhaps that old Life Magazine series, “The Family of Man,” contributed to my growing belief in universal brotherhood.)
* I left for the islands to become a teacher (or so I thought), but I ended up finding myself a life-long learner. Some of what I learned is summarized in my paper.

Micronesian Worldview

* People in the islands had a broad notion of what it meant to be human–as broad my own had become. But it was not encapsulated in a neat philosophical summary. Here I have used my own notes, compiled over the years into what I called “Micronesian Psyche.”
* Each islander has deep roots in the family. This is best captured in the saying “I am because we are.” Accordingly, great emphasis is placed on deferring to the family and social group. As you might imagine, cultivating personal relationships–and protecting such relationships once they are formed–is paramount. In such a milieu the emphasis is not on the *rights* of the person; it is on the *responsibility* of the person for others and for the whole.
* Inclusiveness is a key cultural value, and so is welcoming others. Peace Corps Volunteers and other foreigners who come to work in the islands always lavish praise on their hosts for the way in which they have embraced them–virtually adopted them.
* In the end, what else do we mean by “human dignity” than this? So, there’s a strong case for arguing that island societies in Micronesia have the final product, even if they do not name all the ingredients.

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