



Elephants in the Living Room



Discussing what needs to be discussed

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.us

Our Lady of Fatima

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First of all, I am so glad to be here. I've attended various Elephants' events, and I think you're doing a great job. And even though someone said you were a little aging, we have quite a vision though, because we are carrying the wisdom of a tradition that's disappearing; but I think it's important that we don't know whose heart.

So, when Tom (Lumpkin) asked me this, I thought: very interesting. So, I want to let the Spirit here at play in me and that what I decided I would write about. But before I begin, I want you to think about two or three things that you would say" What do you think about the future of our faith? How can we make it flourish? So then listen to me, and then we'll see if any of my things that my side sided with yours. And when we open it up for conversation, you can begin to share some of your own ideas.

I know Chris (Shenk)^{2/} quite well, and I know she'll probably be talking a lot about some of those statistics^{3/} we say out there; but I think, for me, looking at those, or hearing about them, that really, that is a problem; but that's not the issue. There's a much larger context within which we are living, and the Church is trying to bring its life into the society that we have to address.

So, when I started thinking about it, I decided the first thing was, see how they love one another.

Now I want to test that. Now that seemed sort of obvious; but, I thought, perhaps that's the key to the future, that the future of the Church is to become safe spaces of love – spaces, communities in which all are welcome, and without shame or blame, can explore their faith, or lack thereof; spaces, where people can find community and understand that difference is not division; spaces, where our interior life is fostered, so that we can become transformed into our most authentic selves; spaces, where we can embody our belief that we are all interconnected; spaces, where, like Jesus, we can offer another way of being in our world, especially, those who wield power, a way of being that reflects the gift of the Spirit; spaces, where the rich tradition of over 2,000 years can be entangled with contemporary insights about who we are, and where we came from.

I'd like to share how I sense we can begin to move in this direction.

1. Read the signs of the times. Deacon Paul Lippard just shared that report about the diocese's future.^{3/} It is very sobering. I suspect we could be talking about any denomination and see a similar read out of diminishing numbers. Although it is alarming on many levels, I believe it reflects the evolutionary moment we are in.

From my study of the development of consciousness and evolutionary theory, I believe we are living at another critical time in history, where the chaos we are experiencing can be the source of a profound shift in evolution, through which something new will emerge. Such shifts do not happen quickly or in one's lifetime. They take decades, centuries as worldviews shift and new understandings of who we are and how we got here emerge. I suggest that we are living through such a time when the various worldviews and values that have shaped human consciousness from our origins to the post-modern world we are living in are vying for dominance.

As a Church, another way to say this is that the Traditional, pre-modern worldview, is at odds with the post-modern one and we, the people, are caught in the middle. The Catholic Church for the most part never accepted the shifts that occurred through the Scientific Revolution or the period of history we call the Enlightenment. Its monarchical structure of power couldn't accept democratic principles. In more recent times the insights of psychology did not factor into the Church's teaching on morality which has focused insights of psychology which has focused on one's personal and sexual morality.

And although it is said that theology follows cosmology, we are very slow to articulate a theology that replaces a three-tier unchanging universe within official teaching as well as in our prayer and rituals.

Of course, with Vatican II, the church began to be more friendly with the insights coming from the secular world and certainly Catholic Social Justice Teaching (CSJT) stretched our sense of morality beyond the personal. Pope Francis has embodied these values in his theology and lives love showing us how to create safe spaces of love. However, that is still an emerging sector of the Catholic Church.

I believe that we are in the midst of competing worldviews—within our world and within our Church. Many scholars who discuss the evolutionary nature of consciousness discuss the importance of including the values of the prior stage within the next evolving stage. Ken Wilber talks of transcend and include. As we continue to evolve, humanity needs the best, the healthiest of all the prior stages. Because much of traditional Christianity never incorporated the values of modernity or post-modernity into their official teaching, the healthiest values of Christianity were not integrated, and therefore didn't influence the next emerging worldviews.

I believe we are experiencing this gap with the exodus of people from the major faith traditions. People like myself, and most of us here, were raised in a traditional Catholic enclave and took seriously Vatican II, which catapulted us through the centuries into an understanding of subsidiarity, ecumenism, primacy of conscience, involvement in the world, and the option for the poor. This continued to develop and deepen with an expansive view of civil rights including race, gender, sexual orientation, and participatory democracy.

With knowledge of evolution and the development of consciousness, we struggled with the questions about who we are, why we are here, and who is God. However, such questions were not being struggled with in most of the local churches, or in the seminaries. As Catholics became educated, we began to ask questions; to see the value of integrating some of what we were learning into our faith life. The sermons, the official statements left us wondering and wandering...wandering to try to find a place of spiritual orientation to respond to our needs.

Today, we are witnessing a struggle between those worldviews. What is most ominous to me is the rise of Christian nationalism and their claiming to have the only truth. Such a world view has a nostalgic appeal to some Catholics; however, I believe that Catholics, like those of us here, who are still connected in some way, or who have found a small Christian community with whom they move and have their being, have a very important role to play in reading the signs of the times in the coming decades.

2. Invite people to reflect on their experience of God/Divine Love within the context of a post-modern world. We need to create safe spaces for Catholics like ourselves and other people of faith to come together to support each other in a time of great upheaval; to keep discerning the signs of the times and to see how our faith when we reflect on such experiences has something to offer the larger planetary community. I believe we can give expression to new facets of how we articulate our faith that will contribute toward what is emerging and resonate with different generations.

We need to explore how we understand who we are and why we are here in light of the insights of quantum physics and evolutionary theory, to explore how to express our sacramental faith anew affirming the priestly gifts of each of us regardless of gender. That is one of the desires I had as I wrote my book, *Journey-Faith in an Entangled World*.^{4/}

Let us remember and be inspired by the parish structures that we developed here in the United States to ensure that Catholic immigrants coming from European countries kept their faith.

Can we envision something similar for this new exploration of our faith. Communities who not only explore their faith together, but have a commitment to service and work with already established groups to keep working for inclusivity, diversity and equity with compassion, and for the common good. Can we create community again and address the isolation and loneliness people feel.

3. Be a moral voice in the public arena and witness to who we are as planetary beings in this time of chaos and transition. Today public policies are more partisan than political. As soon as you are identified with a certain position a label comes with it; and you are marked as that, no matter what you try to say.

We have to find ways to talk across the growing divide. One way is to be clear about which values underlie our position. We propose this because the human person is made in the image of God, and that we become fully human only in relation to others; that all creation is good; that all of life is interconnected; that the Universe's primary aim is the flourishing of a unified planetary community. A good life is based on mutuality, reciprocal love and equality. Speak to the Beatitudes, the fruit of the Spirit: **Love, Joy, Peace, Forbearance (Patience), Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-control** and the importance of the common good and an option for the poor. In addition to the Scriptures we have the body of teaching called the Catholic Social Justice Tradition, which beginning in 1891, sought to apply the Christian tradition to the changing times. (Ref. **Cathonomics, Anthony M. Annet**).

CSJT began in 1891 and continues through today with Pope Francis. When Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, it was rather revolutionary. He saw the need for the Church to address the moral questions that arose in the functioning of modern society with an industrialized economy, condemning the abuses, inequities, and injustices of the new economic arrangements. He applied moral principles rooted in scripture and tradition to the new circumstances of today

Pope Francis, in *Laudato SI*, like *Rerum Novarum*, also a *revolutionary* document, Francis, provides a moral diagnosis of the great moral challenge today -- the intertwined social and environmental crisis -- that threatens our ability to flourish as a healthy planet. Using latest scientific data, he suggests that environmental devastation, brought about by our large scale economic activity, is threatening the health of the planet and its people. He calls for dialogue with all people on how to take care of our common home.

He calls for sustainable development and a more harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, calling it an integral ecology.

Such a change is going to entail personal transformation, as well as institutional transformation, of political and economic structures.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis shows what re-interpreting Scholastic theology might look like. In the place of *Ordo Amor*, Francis moves beyond the call to solidarity to call for fraternity between all peoples in a way that transcends all barriers and boundaries. He stresses the importance of a political culture marked by dialogue and charity, and denounces a globalization that benefits only powerful economic and financial interests. Conflicts are breaking out and people are hunkering down behind barriers, forsaking an open world marked by solidarity, fraternity, and social friendship. He sees a solidarity-rebuking individualism and the lack of a true sense of global community united in common purpose.

Francis calls for a new form of openness based on his model of the "polyhedron" — where all people and cultures are respected and affirmed and where the whole is greater than the parts. A far cry from what is happening today.

The teaching Church must teach CSJT. It is not political as it isn't partisan policies. However, many Catholics don't know this. The ordained clergy don't know this. And so, those of us who are still part of the faithful have to become active. The Church has lost most of its moral authority. But speaking from one's heart and living the values, we are urging our public policies to embody, can still be persuasive.

4. Make a Commitment to one's interior life-contemplative practice (- Rahner's quote...) The Christian of the future will be a mystic, having had an experience of God, or s/he will be nothing at all.

We have not taught the mystical tradition very well. It is strong in Catholicism as it is in every faith tradition. It is the encounter with Divine indwelling in each of us. It is not privatized but rather has a "real" impact on the world. Today words like mindfulness, meditation, and contemplation are intermingled. However, there is a specific understanding that reflects the apophatic tradition of prayer within Western Christianity. It is non-discursive prayer. You are emptying yourself...*kenosis*...to the working of Divine Love within you.

Over time, as one sits opening oneself to Divine Love, one awakens to one's unhealthy self. One's shadow emerges; and as we become aware of all that, triggers us; and how our basic needs often dictate our reaction to situations and people, we can begin to be aware of what is happening, and not simply react, but rather, respond out of our most authentic selves — out of Christ consciousness.

Today, many people, especially younger folks, prefer to call themselves spiritual rather than religious. There is a yearning to be in touch with the spiritual impulse within us. Developing one's interior life has not been a priority within Catholic circles. In the future, we need to give more emphasis to one's interior life and offer resources and guidance in those areas.

5. Model Synodality—skills of dialogue and empathy — I am so glad that Pope Francis has continued to call for the Church to continue becoming a synodal church. However, it won't be that if we don't focus on one's interior growth through prayer and contemplation. Dialogue is so much more than a skill set.

I don't think we can do synodality except from a contemplative heart. I talked with Bill Isacc who put the work on Dialogue by physicist David Bohm into practical applications, and asked him that question: "Can you do dialogue without a contemplative heart?"

For in dialogue, you are truly open to the other person's position. You are not in the conversation to convert anyone. There is a belief that everyone has something to offer to how we move forward. This is difficult. Especially today when even the value of engaging in dialogue is in question as what seems to work is bullying and transactional deal making.

We need to learn how to listen. In dialogue you intensify your awareness to what triggers you and why you react the way you do to see where you are blocking another's insight with your conviction that your way is the right way.

Your interior work through contemplation is very important. In dialogue you respond from the magnetic center of divine love in hopes of imagining another way forward. There is an excellent section on contemplative dialogue in my book. A very practical piece with specific questions and processes to move in this direction.

The Church is a microcosm of the world...if we can come together, hear our varying positions and choose to really listen and move forward together — that would be revolutionary, and the Gospel would come alive again!

6.Educate for public contemplation—This is a desire of Constance FitzGerald, OCD, from Baltimore, MD. She has written extensively on the transformative power of contemplation and has been my mentor. She puts forth this desire that we educate for public contemplation. This does not necessarily mean that we pray in public places but rather to see how as we “take a long loving look at the real” through contemplation, we are making new connections between the Gospel vision and values and today’s world.

Public contemplation is a profound re-education of human desire and consciousness so needed at this time in the earth’s evolutionary process. With contemplation, there are no longer walls separating the experience of God, of self, and of the world. Everything is entangled.

Connie challenges us: Those who teach...need to understand and believe in the transformative character of the contemplative process, inasmuch as this process is integral, not only to fully developed humanity, but also to the new form of human existence struggling to be born, therefore, to the continued evolutionary thrust of the earth and the universe.

We need to know how to educate for contemplation and transformation if the earth is to be nurtured, if the people are to be delivered from the scapegoating oppression of all kinds of violence, and if humanity is to fill its role in ushering in the next era of life on earth.

This may be the most basic challenge of religion today: education for a transformative contemplation, which would radically affect human motivation, consciousness, desire, and, ultimately, every other area of human life and endeavor. “

How we respond to those insights is critical. The issues that separate us are increasing as we become more conscious of how racial, sexual, and gender bias, economic inequality, war, and the exploitation of the world’s resources have influenced and shaped various structures within which we live.

These abuses in our systems are becoming visible and no longer tolerated. The complexity is great.

On the contemplative path we can begin to imagine new responses to the polarities we are facing. We can grow in our capacity to hold the larger picture so we can move into the future together.

Let me conclude with a final quote from Connie: “And what would we have to do to achieve this if we believed it? What would educators in our schools and colleges do? What would business leaders meeting to discuss how to break the cycle of violence and bolster the economic vitality of our cities do? What agenda would politicians pursue? What would women’s groups do? Where would Church leaders put their energies? What would each one of us do if we believed in the enormous power of contemplative transformation, transformation in Beloved Sophia?”

If we believe that and live it...become spaces of Love...I believe there will be new life within the Church and the faith community.

Transcribed by

Tom Kyle

From notes of Sr. Nancy Sylvester

- 1/ Sr. Nancy Sylvester, IHM is the founder and executive director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and dialogue, which strives to realize “the shift in consciousness necessary to embrace our evolutionary journey and engage the critical issues facing us in ways that foster dialogue, relationships, compassion and justice.”
- 2/ Sr. Christine Schenk, SCJ is the co-founder of FutureChurch, whose efforts call the Church to reform and renewal that provides all Catholics the opportunity to participate fully in Church life, especially by expanding its leadership beyond the present requirement of male celibacy. She will speak at the next Elephants’ educational forum on May 20, 2025 on Personal Reflections on the State of the Church and a Look into the /future

- 3/ Future for the Archdiocese of Detroit, published by the AoD and is printed as an attachment to this paper.
- 4/ *Journey-Faith in an Entangled World*, by Nancy Sylvester, IHM, is an excellent resource to continue your reflection on the future of our faith. It is available in paperback and an e-Book at Amazon.com

Future for the Archdiocese of Detroit

In 2024, there are 224 Active priests in parish ministry

- By 2929 (4 years), it is projected that we will have 163 active priests.
 - 61 less priests in 4 years
- By 2034 (9 years) it is projected that we will have 134 active priests.
 - 90 less priests, it is projected that we will have 134 active priests.
- Nearly 70% of our active priests are 50 or older.
- 51.3 % of active priests are between the ages of 50-69.
- 40 active priests are over 70 years old.
- There are 87 priests who are senior status.
- 25% of our priests are religious or from other dioceses worldwide. (56 priests)

In 2024, there are 213 churches and missions

- We have 213 churches and missions in 2024.
 - 122 less parishes since 1972.
- 30 to 50 parishes will run out of money in the next 3 to 5 years.
- We have 81 Catholic schools in 2024.
 - 142 less schools since 1972.
- Total student population decreased by 67.3% between 1980 to 2024.
- Total student population decreased by 50.8 % between 2000 to 2024.

The majority of parishes have fewer than 500 regular mass attendees.

- 66 parishes have fewer than 300 people attend on a weekend.
- 76 parishes have an average of 301-600 people attend on a weekend.
- 37 parishes have an average of 601-1,000 people attend on a weekend.
- 34 parishes have an average of 1,000+ people attend on a weekend.

Since 2000 (Last 25 years)

- Registered parishioners have decreased by 35.1%
- Infant baptisms have decreased by 68.1%
- Catholic marriages are down 69%.
- Interfaith marriages have decrease by 79%.
- 2 in10 children who are baptized Catholic do not receive First Communion.
 - First Communions are down 61%.
- 4 in 10 who are baptized Catholic do not receive Confirmation.
- Confirmations are down 54%.

Deacons in the Archdiocese of Detroit

- There are 127 active deacons.

- There are 68 retired/inactive.
 - Average age of the diaconate: 70
 - Median age of the diaconate: 0.
 - Half of the active deacons are senior status.

Nationwide Trends

- 85% of 8th graders stop practicing their faith by age 21!
- 83% of Catholic millennials do not attend mass weekly!
 - Those born between 1980 and 2000.
- 52% of those raised Catholic have left the Church.