

1-4-08 - Can the Church learn to listen?

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Let's imagine that William Shakespeare, who, as far as we know, enjoyed a good time, got so much satisfaction out of writing his plays that he began to imagine that his characters were not merely objects of his creation but real, live people. Shakespeare was not just curious about his characters, we was coming to love them, wanted to be with them, share their lives, especially to drink a tankard of ale in the pub with old Falstaff.

Now let's apply that analogy to God.

First, stop thinking about God as a super-scientist or master craftsman, who designs our nervous and circulatory systems and gives us brains by which to read the stars and thus reason to His existence, but as an artist, and writer, like Shakespeare, who wants to come and live with us. Not because He's lonely or wants to teach us something, but just because He loves us so much he wants to live our lives -- and suffer our death.

I'd like to say that I thought of that analogy myself. But the Shakespeare-God is the creation of George Dennis O'Brien, whose new book, *Finding the Voice of the Church* (Notre Dame University Prress), is an imaginative and challenging attempt to get the Catholic Church, which he acknowledges has recently lost much of its moral authority, to speak with a different voice by first learning how to listen.

I first encountered Dennis O'Brien, philosopher and president emeritus of the University of Rochester, in the 1970s when he wrote in *Commonweal* magazine that philosophy should be taught not by philosophers but by English teachers.

O'Brien confesses to being a "Commonweal Catholic," and considers his stance a "middle-of-the-road liberalism" sympathetic with the Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) agenda for lay participation in the governance of the church. But O'Brien is unpredictable in his analysis of the church's plight, and anyone who reads him merely to have his or her convictions bolstered is in for a few surprises.

The American bishops, he says, have lost their public voice not merely because of the sexual abuse scandal. Even though American Mass attendance surpasses that of de-Christianized Europe, here the younger generation is falling away from Christian belief. One reason is that once the Vatican Council closed, "the spirit of dialogue evaporated." John Paul II and then Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, conducted a teaching papacy, not a learning papacy, as if they feared open discussion.

Thanks to modern communication techniques, the Pope has become the public "voice" of the church. The trouble with this, suggests O'Brien, is that of the many "voices" the Pope could use he has chosen those that cannot be heard effectively in the modern world. We have become accustomed to the Pope as "super-professor" or "judge." He writes long

encyclicals and delivers homilies in which he tells us definitively -- sometimes infallibly -- what to think. At one time he said the issue of women's ordination was settled, and not to be discussed.

But our experience of the professor and judge model is that they are not infallible. Historians, for example, admit there is much they don't know and invite colleagues to correct them. O'Brien suggests that the Pope play the role of "patriarch," a "father" who has authority in his family based on his love for them, even though good fathers are sometimes wrong.

O'Brien beautifully contrasts the Peter in Matthew's Gospel, who receives the "keys of the kingdom," which is interpreted as papal authority, and the post-resurrection Peter, who has experienced forgiveness, in John. Jesus tells Peter to "Feed my sheep."

O'Brien suggests that the Pope learn from the psychotherapy of Carl Rogers, become the father who listens skillfully, and then teaches by offering forgiveness as a central Christian apostolic approach. He should teach more through prophetic action than through words. For example, Pius XII should have condemned the Holocaust, but most of all he should have demanded the freedom to visit Dachau where four thousand Catholic priests were interned. And what if Pius XII, like the King of Denmark, had worn the yellow Star of David on his robes? O'Brien reminds us that Ratzinger, as bishop of Munich, was only ten miles from Dachau, but never went through its gates.

O'Brien closes with the suggestion that the Pope every five years should invite the world's leading intellectuals, including both Catholic theologians and those who opposed the church's teachings, to a meeting in the Sistine Chapel, where, under Michelangelo's Last Judgment, they discuss the world's biggest problems. The Pope's role is to sit quietly and listen. Then consider all they have said, and publish their papers with his replies.

If only Benedict XVI, for whom O'Brien shows much respect, would read this book. If not, perhaps the American bishops could invite Dennis O'Brien to run listening workshops, after they read it too.