

What If?
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When I worked at the US bishops' Conference, every so often on Tuesday morning there would be the posting of newly made bishops on our bulletin board. And every so often, you would hear staff members say, "How did he get chosen? Holy smokes, Holy Spirit!"

When I was told I was to receive the NFPC Touchstone Award, all I could say in the words of the Fiddler on the Roof when asked how his traditions came about, "I don't know!" I do know that I am deeply touched in being thought of as a priests' priest. It is the highest honor I could receive in this life as a priest.

My deepest thanks and gratitude to the National Federation of Priests Councils for this evening's honor, and for being able to share in the honor of Sr. Katrina [Schuth, OSF] a colleague and beloved and cherished friend of three decades.

With your permission, I am dedicating the honor to my deceased colleagues: Doctors Dean Hoge, Mori Lorr, Che Fu Lee, Hans Furth, Richard Schoenherr and Fr. Rollins Lambert. Dean was a colleague and dear friend of three decades whose memorial mass I celebrated recently. Mori Lorr was a Jewish psychologist at whose feet I sat gleaming his wisdom. Hans Furth was the foremost scholar in the work of Piaget who was forever thinking outside the box. Che Fu Lee was a prominent sociologist who brought scholars from China and America together. Richard Schoenherr and I predicted the priests' shortage and took some lumps because of it, and Rollin Lambert, the first African American priest for Chicago was my best and most cherished friend.

When I was contacted about receiving the NFPC award, I happened to come across a letter I had written my bishop as a young priest after being asked to take a position with the bishops' Conference in 1975. My bishop, Romeo Blanchette said no. Being raised with a rebellious spirit, and more so, being convinced of the value of research for the church by Fr. Bill Friend [now bishop Friend] at Notre Dame, I wrote bishop Blanchette a "what if?" letter.

Dear Bishop Blanchette,

Since our meeting last Tuesday, a meeting that was most cordial and complimentary, I have been in a state of mental confusion.

The idea that most torments me is the question: "What if I were to head up a national office of research and policy? Could anything in our present national state of affairs be done in such a monumental way that dioceses throughout the country would be truly supported and would support the endeavor?"

During the years 1969-71, I had the honor of working for the Office of Research in Catholic Education at Notre Dame. This office was the only center where hard core data were being collected and analyzed in an effort to understand the inner difficulties of Catholic Education concerning religious content, finances, administration and the personal attitudes of the laity toward Catholic schools. In addition to this work, a data bank was being formed in order to collect all the available information on research that was conducted within Catholic and Protestant circles throughout the country.

Today there are several new movements in the Church that can add to her luster or be a thorn in her side, depending on what direction they take. We have permanent deacons, religious coordinators, parish boards . . . and many other new efforts for bringing unity and strength to Catholic education. But where are there tracking stations to learn what is and is not functioning properly? Where is the research that should act as a guideline for training programs in the seminaries and for those in the field?

What if, throughout the country those in leadership roles were to embrace research methods as a means for producing effective religious values in our youth and adult populations? What would happen if a national network of researchers was established?

What would happen if our seminaries and those in charge of permanent deacon programs were to instill in the minds of these men that every project they undertake should be accompanied by prayer, an agenda, and a built-in feedback system to see how effective the agenda was?

What would happen if the bishops of the United States had a nerve center whereby all the promising research in Catholic education was gathered; a center that would encourage religious and lay persons to take a second and more structured look at their work to determine the inner causes of success or failure — a center which would advocate that with the grace of God and the full use of rationalization many of our dreary forecasts for the future could be turned into challenges?

What if the center at Notre Dame were still in progress, and periodically national leaders were invited to exchange ideas using a structured, research format, much like doctors use at their medical gatherings? . . .

Only God knows the answers to these questions. One thing I know is that what has been said above about research is not theory or a visionary dream—I have worked in such a center and tasted the beauty and hope it can produce. I also know that having once tasted the beauty and practicality of such work and being asked to reduplicate it again for the entire country I will never again be the same because of the question, “What if it were to come true on the national level?”

I have now spoken. I pray, whether it is I or another person, that we as instruments of the Church will not let the practical ideal of a research center for Catholic Education slip out of our hands. We are in a new age—an age that must utilize every

plausible means not only to remain sane, but also to push forward with new ideas.

Again, thank you for the deep concern and kindness I received from you last Tuesday. God bless you.

Today, I can say unequivocally that most of those hypothetical “what ifs” materialized and I was blessed with research colleagues who made this dream come true.

I still cherish this dream, not as mine alone, but for future generations. In many ways we have passed from an age in which “what if” was the cry of the day to a time of “iffyness.” It is a time that is the direct antithesis to asking what if and the inspiration it generates to theorize, imagine, construct new forms, and to be creative. I don’t mean to imply that there aren’t creative, visionary people. We have a section on our website called success stories on which we have posted an enormous number of very creative ideas and programs.

What is implied is a hope that the spirit of asking what if outweighs a stifled spirit that sees things as iffy and has lost an insatiable taste for exploring fresh ideas and seeking new frontiers.

It is no exaggeration to say that the spirit of research, experimentation and expanding intellectual curiosity has been dampened in the church. There are several reasons for this; one being scandals that have cast us into a defensive stance. Scandals have a way of taking the wind out of our enthusiasm and gusto. But it is more than scandals that are stifling us. The present economic crisis is also stifling the spirit of imagination. The luxury of brainstorming, exploring ideals and expanding personnel to support them more often than not give way to fiscal constraints and a play-it-safe-conservative mentality. We are also in an age that more often than not encourages us to run rather than walk, to live the moment rather than to thoughtfully plan for the future, and to think off the top of our head than in our head. I find it mind boggling that there are yet bailed out banks and institutions that are still not studying where the bail out money is being spent. Without a research mentality, you can’t have accountability, and without accountability you fly by the seat of your pants and a common sense that often doesn’t make sense.

Years ago the prominent theologian Romano Guardini felt our new post modern world was causing us to lose our contemplative edge, and I add here a study, reflective mentality. He stated, “All around us we see activity, organization, operations of every possible type; but what directs them? [It is] An inwardness no longer really at home with itself. An ‘interiority’ too superficial to contact the truth lying at life’s center, which no longer reaches the essential and everlasting, but remains somewhere just under the skin-level of the provisional and the fortuitous.”

To ask what if and to seek a deeper interiority and the truth lying at life’s center has been and always will be my dream. The NFPC award given to me represents a dream

come true, but also a dream future generations much continue to possess in order to create a sound priesthood and a healthy, progressive church. May our new millennium bless us with young men and women, who dream dreams, wonder “what if?” and possess a love for an inwardness at home with itself.