

THE CHILDREN, THE TWO STANDARDS AND THE FORCE AWAKENS (Part 1)

Posted by Dr. Michael Bautista in Our Daily Lives

“And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them” (Acts 14:27). Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with what must have been wonderful stories.

With this phrase, the need to present, discuss, evaluate and reflect becomes obvious, and so I am writing to seek comment, perhaps to enlighten, but at the very least share some of the joy I experience working with grades 4,5, and 6 during Sunday school at St. Pius X in St. John’s.

It isn’t all roses. I’ve learned that if the students start making paper airplanes with their handouts, *don’t* correct their paper airplane construction technique. I was disgusted at how *clueless* they were at making paper airplanes, so I showed them how to make one properly. Thank goodness class does end. We call upon the Holy Spirit to join us in our room, and then I often do a check-in, to see how each student’s week has been. We call upon the Spirit to guide us with wisdom as we read the Gospel of the day. Students have a highlighter, and I have taught them to listen and read along as I read, and they highlight what the Spirit inspires them to notice. Their inspired choices of phrases lead the discussion of the reading.

The three types of love as described by Benedict in *Deus Caritas Est* led to the discussion of agape – “You don’t have to like someone to love him.” Although we might not like the way someone is or what he does because it is bad or evil, we can still hope and pray to God that he straightens up; we love him in the sense that we want the best for him. Kids can catch on to that pretty quick.

I decided we would make a list of people that we didn’t like, the “agape” list, and we would pray for them. Top of the list: Donald Trump! They had grave concerns about kicking the Muslims out, and building a wall, and throwing out Mexicans; our action plan: if we were in America, we would tell all our friends not to vote for Donald Trump. We prayed he would get straightened out.

God’s infinite love, as exemplified in the readings that precede the Principle and Foundation, was the focus of the fall. My goal was to realize the constant presence of a friend in Jesus, who would be with them through thick and thin.

God’s love is a light that shines on us, and then through us. People who shine from within don’t need the spotlight. This light of Christ was a way of understanding not only the humility but also the absence of anxiety in not needing to create the light, but just to transmit it. It made it easy to understand trying not to create a shadow, but a clear window for that light to shine through. To believe that God is always there, they had to understand God is in everything. That was fun. I had a slide show in which they had to find God in a wide variety of pictures. We acknowledge the presence of the Spirit in our room, outside in the sky, and in the wind blowing the branches around. With God present in everyone and everything, we could understand that everything in our world was a gift from God, and an opportunity for us to find our way closer to God.

Crafts and cards we sent at Christmas were used to demonstrate how we could be contemplatives in action. Learning the examen, and in doing so, learning how to reflect and then make a decision was not easy for this age, but I could tell that some could use it. We did one at the end of this year, unwinding it to see how everyone felt we did. We talked about what was good, what wasn’t. The Christmas cards and crafts are definitely on for next year, as well as a visit for lunch with the elderly at St. Patrick’s Mercy Home, something new for our action piece.

With Lent came the ideas of giving things up, something we usually associate with sacrifice and suffering. I had them write on pieces of paper their favourite screen time activity, their favourite candy, and their favourite TV show. I collected all the pieces of paper in a clear plastic container. Then I spilled them out on the desk and emptied it. I asked what was left.

I explained that what was left was room – room to think without distractions, room to change things they always wanted to do differently. Lent is a time for reflection and change, the Christian’s time for resolutions, like New Year’s is for everyone else. This was our time to take advantage of the opportunity of room to change for the better.

When debating what we could do after emptying the container in the Lent story, one child piped up, "You could do the examen during Lent" as a means of reflection. Just like that, not in a see-how-smart-I-am tone. It puzzles me how prayer can be so matter-of-fact for kids; it can become for them, even in such a complex form, so natural as that.

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Perhaps the most satisfying activity this year was the Two Standards. Using another slide show (young people love Power Point), we saw Lucifer with a bunch of gangsters huddled in a room. *“Get all the people to crave wealth, and get them to rely on the honour and status that comes with wealth. Give them what they want. Make them feel proud and let them feel they need no one else but themselves. Let them think they’ve got it made and they have no need of God. From pride I can lead anyone to other vices.”* That was easy for the students to understand.

What was more difficult was to convey what Jesus’ camp was like. *“Draw them to the greatest spiritual poverty, looking to God for security, not to wealth or status.”* They were primed to understand that everything was a result of the generosity of God. *“Just look outside at that beautiful sky! You couldn’t buy that sky with all the money in the world!”*

To understand poverty, I used the Star Wars film *“The Force Awakens”* which almost all the students had seen. Rey, the hero of the film, demonstrates material poverty as a scavenger on the planet Jakku, collecting space junk to buy tasteless food. She demonstrated that she didn’t require material wealth to be somebody important. In fact, with no possessions except a scooter and a stick, she became the hero of the show.

The dependence of the Republic upon the Force demonstrates spiritual poverty. The greeting, *“May the force be with you”* shows the Resistance fighters of the Republic as spiritually impoverished, trusting in the Force, in my analogy, a metaphor for God, to see them through to the end. As Rey begins to develop her skills during the film, she learns to use the Force to escape from her captors on the Starkiller Base.

The power of the Force in the final lightsaber battle between Rey and Ren, the fighter for the evil “First Order” prevails as Rey defeats Ren before the Starkiller Base disintegrates. Trust in the Force enables the victory of good over evil. The humility of the Republic shows it is centered upon the Force, not on its self-interest, just as we should be centered on God, not on our own interests. Ignatius says this leads us to all virtues.

Jesus tells his followers to accept and even desire the insults and contempt that the world offers us. To demonstrate this idea, I used the example of Gandhi, who extracted Indian independence from Great Britain. Two quotes were used: *“Nobody can hurt me without my permission”* and *“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”* Gandhi showed that no one could get to him unless he allowed it; he persevered to his goal as Jesus did. Secondly, recognition to the point of a fight is a win. In the Acts of the Apostles, suffering ridicule because of Christ was also considered a win.

At the end of the slide show I gave them a choice:

- *The First Order exemplifies the choice of Lucifer’s Standard of self-interest in power and wealth over the well-being of all.*
- *The New Republic exemplifies the choice of following Jesus, seen as the Force, that supports the life and well-being of all. Humility is seen in the dependence on the Force, and the cooperation with others.*

The choices were clear, and the choice was clear. They got it.

Being involved in St. Bon’s taught me the principles of Ignatian education - the grad-at-grad, the ratio studiorum, etc. so that I understand them. But I didn’t get to practice them. The idea of the teacher learning from the student as well as the other way around is what I experience in Sunday School. Having to bring the ideas of the Spiritual Exercises, like the Principal and Foundation, the Two Standards, to the most fundamental level, and to put these ideas in a context that suits them, and then to see how they learn it, teaches me!

About The Author

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