

THESIS / DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title : Apostles, Prophets, Ambassadors, and Angels: De La Salle's *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and the Apostolic Imagination No. of Pages 390

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Statement of the Problem

Main Problem:

The question this dissertation addresses is of how St. John Baptist de La Salle's *Meditations for the Time of Retreat (MR)*, a devotional text written at the beginning of the eighteenth century, can be reappropriated by modern-day religious educators in such a way as to contribute to the development of an apostolic spirituality that unites a concern for professional commitment to that of growth in holiness. The dissertation proposes that De La Salle's text be employed as an instrument for shaping the religious imagination of its readers by providing them with classic scriptural paradigms around which to construct an imagination that is distinctively apostolic in its orientation.

Sub-Problems:

In order to approach De La Salle's work from the perspective of imagination, it is necessary to establish how a text written nearly three hundred years ago can still shed light on contemporary issues in religious education. This question is addressed by exploring the idea of "religious classics" as elaborated especially by David Tracy.

The tendency to confuse imagination with fantasy necessitates a discussion of imagination as a dimension of knowing, as a means of grasping the transcendent dimensions of human existence. This question is addressed by developing a critical-realist account of religious imagining and the place of imagination in faith.

The question of how scriptural texts can be actualized for the guidance of life is addressed by the treatment of imagination as a paradigmatic process.

The question of how an imaginative approach connects with Lasallian tradition is addressed through a proposal to correlate the eyes of faith, a principal Lasallian theme, with paradigmatic imagination.

The question of how De La Salle's meditations function to shape imagination is taken up in the discussion of the MR's master and subsidiary paradigms.

The question of the adequacy of faith-interpretations is taken up by a discussion of criteria for valid faith-interpretations.

The question of how imagination relates to apostolic spirituality is taken up by the discussion on apostolic imagination.

Questions regarding methods for the personal appropriation of the MR are also addressed through the provision of concrete proposals for indwelling the text.

Procedure

The question that has shaped this study is the question of how a spiritual text written for the spiritual formation of schoolmasters in eighteenth century France can be made to perform a similar function for religious educators in an entirely different cultural and historical context. In responding to this question, the author has proposed that an appeal to imagination provides a fruitful way of transcending the limitations of both text and context, allowing religious educators in the present to shape a faith-vision that manifests a creative fidelity to the vision embodied in De La Salle's original work. It is because of its appeal to imagination that the MR can function for religious educators today as a religious classic capable of evoking spiritual experiences and insights that possess enduring truth and value for those engaged in the ministry of educating in faith. Given the importance of imagination in this venture, a major portion of this study has been devoted to promoting an understanding of imagination as a human capacity at the service of the quest for truth and meaning.

The study proceeds first by providing the historical background necessary for the appreciation of the MR as a text of its times and as an imaginative faith-construal of an actual lived history. A presentation of the MR itself, its background, sources, and key themes follows.

The fourth chapter provides the theoretical basis for approaching the MR from the perspective of its imagination-forming capacity. The approach taken toward imagination in this study is fundamentally a critical-realist stance which, while recognizing the subjective component of all imagining, holds to the conviction that religious symbols, metaphors, and stories (as well as theories, doctrines and creeds) can and do in fact render aspects of the world truthfully, that they do bring us to a knowledge of what is, although never in an unmediated or exhaustive manner. This chapter underscores the importance of imagination in all faith-interpretation. The discussion is further sharpened by the presentation of imagination as a paradigmatic process.

Since the MR is written to enable a faith-vision of the ministry of the Christian educator, the author then proceeds to correlate the discussion on paradigmatic imagination with De La Salle's reflections on "seeing with the eyes of faith." The chapter seeks to establish that faith-vision for De La Salle is essentially a process of paradigmatic imagining whereby, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, paradigms from scripture and tradition are employed for the purpose of grasping and interpreting the dimension of the sacred in the work of the educator. This correlation provides the key to how to reappropriate the meditations today.

The actual reappropriation of the MR is the object of the final two chapters. Here, the author identifies the key paradigms in the MR and draws out their implications for shaping the vision, values, attitudes, and practices of educators.

Treatment of Data

A historical-critical approach to the MR is undertaken in the second and third chapters of the dissertation. The author shows how the faith experience contained in the MR grows out of De La Salle's long struggle in attempting to bring the benefits of a human and Christian education within reach of the poor.

The data on imagination and its uses is taken from the work of theologians such as Paul Avis, Garrett Green, Ray Hart, Stanley Hauerwas, Philip Keane, James Loder, William Lynch, James McClendon, John Shea, William Spohn, and religious educators such as Craig Dykstra, James Fowler, and Sharon Daloz-Parks. The author draws upon these sources to create an account of "seeing with the eyes of faith" as an exercise of paradigmatic imagining funded by sacred scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Findings

Approaching the MR from the perspective of its capacity for forming an imagination attuned to apostolic vision, values, and concerns, is a fruitful way for releasing the text's transformative potential and allowing it to shape the faith of religious educators today.

Imagination from a critical-realist perspective is the way in which human beings give form to faith. Paradigms drawn especially from the faith-tradition provide normative patterns which believers employ to discern the meaning of their own faith-experiences and pattern appropriate faith-responses.

De La Salle's reflections on seeing with the eyes of faith can be fruitfully correlated with contemporary theology's understanding on the role of imagination in faith. Taking the eyes of faith as scripture-shaped imagination interpreting reality under the guidance of the Holy Spirit provides a way of understanding what this classic theme might actually mean.

The MR contributes to the shaping of apostolic imagination by providing classic paradigms to construe the relationship between God, educators and their pupils. These paradigms allow educators to recognize and respond to the presence of God in their work.

Conclusions

Spirituality, like any faith activity, relies on imagination for the shaping of vision and meaning. Imagination is the process by which the transcendent is rendered in human consciousness. The material content of one's imagination—the images, symbols, metaphors, and stories contained therein—provide the normative patterns by which believers recognize and respond to God's presence in human existence.

An apostolic spirituality, that is, a spirituality that regards service to human need as a way of responding to God and growing in holiness requires an imagination that

encourages and emphasizes this faith dynamic. This study refers to this as “apostolic imagination.”

The MR can be fruitfully employed as a means to shaping an apostolic imagination in educators seeking to develop a spirituality that unites professional commitment and the quest for holiness. By providing classic scriptural paradigms to construe the relationship between the educator, God, and young people, the MR enables educators to see their work through the eyes of faith and thus to respond to the redeeming presence of God in their midst.

Recommendations

The account of how imagination enters into the process of faith-interpretation needs to be further enriched by a discussion of what the believer brings to the faith-interpretation process. This has only been hinted at in this study but it is a topic that requires further exploration in order to arrive at amore substantial account of the relationship between faith and imagination.

The author is aware that the account of imagination given here has significant implications beyond the scope of the immediate concerns in this study. On several occasions, it has been mentioned that the turn to imagination has important consequences for a pedagogy of faith. Indeed, in the quest for a more holistic epistemology to ground evangelization and catechesis, the turn to imagination is receiving a renewed appreciation in many quarters. For example, following a significant amount of discussion on the question of approaches to evangelization and catechesis in Asia, the bishops in the 1999 Synod for Asia concluded that the initial proclamation of Jesus and the continuing catechesis of believers requires a turn to the language of imagination. This view is clearly reflected in the post-synodal exhortation in which the pope suggests that “*narrative methods* akin to Asian cultural forms” are to be the preferred in the task of initial proclamation. This is followed up by the recommendation that “subsequent catechesis should follow an *evocative pedagogy*, using *stories*, *parables* and *symbols* so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching.” The exhortation goes on to recommend that evangelizers and catechists ought to employ alternative *images* of Jesus which are intelligible to Asian minds and cultures while being faithful to the scriptural witness. The discussion of imagination presented in this dissertation is certainly relevant to these concerns but needs to be developed further, particularly if we want to look at the role of a pedagogy of imagination in relation to the task of inculturating evangelization and catechesis.

The discussion on paradigmatic imagination can contribute significantly to the development of a suitable method for actualizing sacred scripture, an important issue for many religious educators today. In exploring the concept of paradigmatic imagination, this author has tried to illuminate albeit in a somewhat exploratory way, something of what the actualization process involves. Further study needs to be done in this area, particularly since the approach as described here tends to stress the movement from text to life and does not give sufficient attention to the movement from life to text. A more systematic and substantial account of the use of paradigmatic imagination in the actualization of scripture therefore needs to be undertaken. Related to the question of actualizing sacred scripture is the significance of paradigmatic imagination in the

guidance of the moral life. This study has drawn much insight from the works of William Spohn, Philip Keane, James McClendon, Stanley Hauerwas, Craig Dykstra and Richard Hays regarding the role of imagination in Christian ethics. The imaginative approach opens a rich avenue for exploration, particularly in relation to the question of how faith-vision relates to the development of character and moral discernment.