

Additional Resources

- Anderson, H. and E. Foley (1997), *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. This book is a wonderful description and critical analysis of the interwoven nature of ritual and narrative. In focusing on moments of birth, life covenant and death, it also provides an excellent introduction into Christian theological insight about baptism, marriage and anointing of the sick. The ways in which it talks about parabolic and mythic narratives and rituals provide crucial insight into our media culture immersion, too.
- Kegan, R. and L. Lahey (2000), *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. For years I've been recommending Robert Kegan's work to people, particularly his books *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Unfortunately, for many people his ideas are drawn in too complex and evocative a way in these books. I still think his books are important! But if you can't find your way through them, or you'd like an easier or more practical place to start, give this book a try. Kegan is a crucial scholar of adult learning and development, and in this small book he and Lisa Lahey walk people through a process of transformative learning.
- McGann, M. (2002), *Exploring Music and Theology*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. Music shapes meaning in profoundly important ways, but seldom do media studies scholars who are considering popular culture and religion understand the liturgical and theological elements of that shaping process. Here's a lovely little book that suggests some ways to examine how music shapes meaning in religious communities.
- Mitchell, J. (1999), *Visually Speaking, Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark. This book is ostensibly 'about' radio preaching in Britain and America, but it is also deeply about conveying deep theological insights in ways that are attuned to the dynamics of media culture.
- Tilley, T. (2000), *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. This book considers Catholic tradition from the standpoint of practice. Focusing on Catholic intellectual tradition, rather than Catholic theological tradition, Tilley explains why catechesis has to focus on performative practice, has to work with orthopraxis not just orthodoxy.
- Vella, J. (1994), *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. This book is chock full of great stories about learning and teaching in a variety of contexts all over the world. Vella has organized it around a set of 12 principles that are great basic principles for all kinds of learning environments.
- Weinberger, D. (2002), *Small Pieces, Loosely Joined*, New York: Perseus Books. The best book I've found for helping theologians and members of communities of faith begin to understand why the Net has had such an impact. This is a luminously written, accessible introduction that raises profoundly theological questions.

Chapter 12

Changes in the Thai Catholic Way of Life

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Stories about the Thai Catholic lifestyle are little known to most people around the world. I believe this is due to the fact that Thai Catholics are a minority in a mostly Buddhist country. In 2000, the population of Thailand was 62 million, but only 272,350 were Catholics (Thai Catholic Calendar, 2001). Furthermore, Thai Catholics have lived quietly and peacefully within the country, not creating any problems of media interest. Thus, the rich heritage of Thai Catholics is an untold story.

In this chapter I wish to share with you my experience and observations as a Thai Catholic. A number of significant shifts have occurred in the Thai cultural context over the past half-century. This chapter concerns the decline in Thai Catholic life as Catholic village communities changed for a number of reasons, including the migration of young people to urban, predominantly Buddhist communities. This trend has been compounded by the influence of materialism, consumerism, individualism and syncretism. My own experience growing up in a strong Catholic village community and migrating to the city offers an illustration of this cultural change.

Yet, I believe there are seeds of new hope emerging for fostering communities of faith through the new initiatives of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand and committed Thai Catholics of the twenty-first century.

The Community of Thai Catholics Fifty Years Ago

I was born in 1957 and grew up in a small Catholic village. The members of my family were parishioners of the Church of St Peter's Chair (Ban Suekhang) of the Talingchan district in the Thonburi province in the suburb of Bangkok. The village consisted of about 800 persons, of Thai, Chinese and mixed origins. This Thai Catholic way of life could be found in various provinces of Thailand. In the year 2000 there were about 447 such villages in Thailand (Thai Catholic Calendar, 2001).¹ The center of almost every Catholic village or community was the parish church with a Catholic school.

From my childhood I remember being a member of three different families: the first was that of my mother and father, the second that of my baptismal godparents, and the third that of my confirmation godparents. Each one directly influenced

my religious formation. The relationship and community we shared gave us an intimate sense of being one family. Larger Catholic families of eight or more children experienced more profoundly the sense of family or community, with more godparents engaging themselves in the lives of the natural family.

Godparents had a distinctive role to play in the upbringing of their godchildren. They not only participated in the baptismal ceremony in the church but also were expected to provide assistance to their godchild whenever possible. This was realized not only by giving gifts and money but also by the special care, attention and advice they offered regarding the faith and spirituality formation of their godchildren. People with many godchildren were respected as exemplary Christians and Catholics of profound faith.

The Communication-rich Environment of the Catholic Village

In our small Catholic village everyone knew every family and its story. This is how it was before the influence of today's modern communications that appear to distract us from the intimate intercommunication and sense of community that bonded us as one family in the past.

Throughout my childhood, storytelling – communicating by word of mouth – offered us not only a sense of our Catholic identity but also a mechanism of moral control that helped ensure our adherence to the teachings of the church. News spread quickly in our village. If you did a good deed, you were surely admired. One might have even been elected or appointed a village leader, president, or member of the parish council committee by the good deeds remembered. One might have been sought after to be godparents, and good married couples were invited to be witnesses at new weddings. Parents or godparents of children who entered religious life or the priesthood were greatly admired and respected by other villagers. Within this communication-rich environment, therefore, parents tried to behave well and teach their children to pray so that their children's and grandchildren's faith might blossom into religious vocations. According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand (Thai Catholic Calendar, 2001), there are 660 priests, 1429 religious sisters and 122 religious brothers in Thailand. The ratio of Catholics to priests in Thailand is approximately 412 to 1.²

Those in the Catholic village who misbehaved or committed such crimes as gambling, adultery, cheating, not attending mass or not participating in communion and confession were resented by other members of the village. Furthermore, people who committed terrible sins – such as divorce, abandoning their family, never confessing or going to communion – were not allowed to be buried in the graveyard of the church. The communication-rich environment created the moral climate of our Catholic villages.

One of my most joyful moments and vivid memories is the sound of the bell every Sunday morning calling the faithful to church. Almost every member of the

family went to church. Our parish had specially reserved seating for mothers with children, thus encouraging parents of newborn children to attend mass. Villagers looked forward to going to church every Sunday because they could dress up, children would play in front of the church, and beautiful pictures, newspapers, and magazines were available for reading and bringing home. The church's bulletin, which was produced by the school, was also available to everybody.

The homily of the priest was exciting for those who attended mass; everyone was curious, wondering who would be found fault with *this* Sunday and who would be instructed and corrected by the priest during the homily. The priest mentioned the names of people who always came late to mass or left early. People were even more interested in listening to the priest's ranting and raving about those who the previous week had misbehaved by fighting, gambling, practicing witchcraft or joining another religion. The image of the family or person criticized would be undermined – they could lose face. They would be challenged by the priest to stop misbehaving and convert themselves to the accepted religious view. Occasionally, people resisted the priest's intonations of moral behavior and did not attend church or participate in community activities.

The involvement of priests in people's private lives created conflict in the villages, but their involvement decreased with changes in the Catholic Church itself. The sacrament of reconciliation and holy communion are examples. Before the 1960s, the church taught that one could not receive communion without also taking the sacrament of reconciliation. As a result, few received communion, some because they did not want to deal with the priest for the sacrament of reconciliation. As transportation became more readily available, some went to churches outside their village. In 1965, the Catholic Church of Thailand began to teach that Catholics could receive communion without undergoing the sacrament of reconciliation with the priest, provided their sin was minor. As a result, the number of people receiving communion rose. Today few approach the sacrament of reconciliation but many receive communion.

Still, in the 1950s and 1960s, the priest was the center of village life. If a person were sick and unable to go to church, the priest would bring the holy communion to that person in the afternoon when he visited the Catholic houses in the village. After the mass everyone had the opportunity to talk; young men and women engaged in conversation and adults would not find fault with them. Parents conversed spontaneously and creatively exchanged the family and village news of the week.

Catholics were dependent on the Catholic community and believed in the priests. The policy of the Catholic Church in Thailand, following faithfully the ways of the missionaries who spread Catholicism since 1567, was that the priest was the head of the community (Chumsripan, 1994, pp. 63–85).³ In this role, he controlled village land, a tradition that dates back to the sixteenth century when the king gave land to the first missionaries, who organized the first Thai Catholic villages. Priests continued the tradition of buying land and arranging for Catholics to live together,

giving the village priest powerful control over the village.⁴ Today, priests do not have such absolute power, as they must answer to an elected pastoral council in each church, and land reform is done by a department of the church. Likewise, in the past the priest controlled the village school, but today the schools are run by the religious congregation. Village Catholics still respect the priest, but only in religious matters; the priest is not part of their daily lives as he was in the past.

These changes were in the context of gradual but profound changes in the means of communication and transportation in my village during the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1967, electricity arrived, replacing lamps and candles. Wealthy families installed television sets in their houses, and their neighbors gathered to watch with them after church on Sundays and sometimes in the evenings. The means of transportation along the canal also gradually changed, as engine boats replaced paddle boats. Little by little, the governor of Bangkok built a road around the village. And in 1974, the first telephone line came to the village, although only one or two families could afford to connect the line to their houses.

Living Together: The Foundation of Love and Sharing

As a child, I studied the catechism every morning at school. The Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Bangkok taught us the basic truths of the Catholic faith, preparing us for the sacraments and introducing us to sacred music and prayers. A variety of rich liturgical year activities, such as Christmas, Corpus Christi and Easter, were brought to life through biblical dramas, dance and choral presentations. Everyone in the village participated in the planning and execution of these celebrations. Men built the stage and scenes for our shows, women prepared special dishes to contribute to the community meal and the leader of the village was ever present to supervise the entire process. By sharing and working together during these celebrations, our community became stronger and more unified in our faith.

One particular parish celebration was especially meaningful to me. Each year on the anniversary of our parish's patron saint, St. Peter's Chair, families would decorate their boats with flowers and banners and join a 'floating procession' around the village. We incorporated much festivity, pageantry and joyfulness in this celebration. In one sense this was a great demonstration of how we communicated, passed on and preserved our rich Catholic heritage.

Often in nearby Buddhist villages there were also grand celebrations around their religious holidays and commemorative religious events. There were fascinating entertainment shows that would draw the attention of a few Catholics who joined in the events. The elders of the village said that because the priest did not allow Catholics to join in the Buddhist activities, the Catholic numbers were always low.

There were times following evening prayer and before children retired that mothers would re-tell animating stories about the school and church in the village. They could capture the imagination of the children by poetically describing how the

men from the village traveled to the northern forests to cut wood and carry it down south along the Chao Praya River. One of the elderly men, the head of carpentry in the village, and his assistant helped build the local church. The women helped by preparing food for the workers.

Another important activity that helped ground our Catholic identity and enrich our bonds of community was the tradition of praying for the dead for seven consecutive nights following a person's death. All of the villagers would come to the home of the deceased after their daily work to pray. There was no discrimination in these times of sorrow. Food was served after our prayer, and, as it always did, food played an important role in holding our community together. Occasionally more than one person died within the same period of time and the community would come together daily for two or three weeks to pray and eat.

I recall one more religious event that seemed to bond our faith community together. There was a special statue of our Blessed Virgin that the parish priest would bring around the village in procession. The statue would be enthroned in a different house each night during a particular period of time. Every member of the family would pray together when the statue was present in their home.

These are a few examples of how our Catholic faith helped bring our village together better than any other social institution could. Those who shared the same beliefs found a variety of religious reasons to come together and celebrate their common bond. This bond became a source of inspiration for ongoing education and creative religious expression within our culture. Here was fertile ground for molding our moral character and sending the deep roots of our Catholic heritage into every fiber of our being.

Today, many of these practices have changed, and although the Catholic villages still exist, the community spirit in them is very different. Today, when someone dies, the body might be taken to a well-known church more convenient to mourners who do not live in the village. The practice of bringing the icon of the Virgin into the home for evening prayers is now rare. Television has contributed to the decline in this ritual, as people prefer to watch favorite evening programs. In addition, villagers who work outside the village often return home too late for the prayers.

The Three Main Means of Religious Media in the Community

I hope to have conveyed something of the importance of relationships in the Thai Catholic communities fifty years ago. In terms of communication, I believe there were three major ways in which people in our villages communicated faith.

The first was human or personal media. Our fathers, mothers, relatives, neighbors, priests, sisters and teachers were the key communicators. This type of communication was very powerful and its influence was felt in many of the interactions we had with one another in the community. The communication-rich environment was a control mechanism of the community of religious faith.

Knowledge of the faith and religious experience was instilled in us through the human and personal media and stayed with us throughout our lives.

The second way of communicating faith was through religious activities that were embedded in our lives. We might refer to these as traditional media. In our Catholic community, these religious activities were the ceremonies we celebrated as a community that nurtured faith within ourselves and bonded the community into a unified and solid community of faith.

The third way was through materials produced by the Catholic Social Communications of Thailand, now known as UCIP (l'Union catholique internationale de la presse, or the Commission for Mass Media). At first, the organization produced only printed material such as newspapers, magazines, leaflets, posters and calendars. In 1968, the work was extended to electronic media, the video and audio sector, and is now called SIGNIS Thailand (The World Catholic Association for Communication). This association began with the production of cassettes, prayers and Church songs. These products could not compete with commercial media, with some exceptions. For example, the Catholic Office of Communication took movies such as *Ben Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* to Catholic villages, where they were popular with both Catholics and Buddhists. The practice largely ended in 1978 with the arrival of modern transportation to take people to the city and its new movie theaters. In 1977, the organization began to produce radio and television programs.

Life Outside the Catholic Community

The rich sense of community that we once experienced began to fade when we left the village. Young people left every day to attend the university; as I did in 1974 when I enrolled at Thammasart University in the heart of Bangkok. As we looked toward the future, we had to travel to find good positions with high salaries in the city, in hopes of securing comfort and security for ourselves. Fifty years ago, Thais would attend school for only four to seven years before they turned to farming. Instead of leaving after elementary school to work in the field, I traveled from my village to high school each day, then to the university, where I got a master's degree. My family was the first in the village to have someone attend a university. When I went to work at a government-owned television station, the largest communication organization in Thailand, everyone in my village talked about it. When I became a television news reporter, people talked about it even more. Little by little after that, young people in my village made their way into higher education.

Young educated Catholics left the villages because there was little work, except in the schools, for educated people. When they moved to the city, they were surrounded by Buddhist society. At first, many found it difficult to preserve their Catholic identity. This was due to the fact that Catholic instructions had forbidden them to join other religious activities. In contrast, religious ceremonies were integrated into the daily working lives of Buddhists, as new building projects,

company anniversaries and receptions for guests were all celebrated. Catholic employees who attended found it difficult because church law at the time forbade participation. Some Catholics who were promoted to high positions in companies were careful not to reveal that they were Catholic.

The Powerful Means of Communication no Longer Exist

As time passed, many of us intermarried and started families with people of other religious faiths. Thus, we lived further away from the fundamental Catholic context, which originally nurtured our profound experience and identity as Catholics. A recent survey found that 66 to 75 percent of Catholic families in Bangkok are families with only one Catholic parent (Muangrat, 1998, p. 105). That number has increased in the past two decades, from 368 Catholics married to non-Catholics in the Bangkok diocese in 1985, to 495 in 2002 (Saengtham College Thailand, 2001).

Communication research states that communication between persons, which is firmly grounded from the beginning, has a definite effect on attitudes, faith and opinions. The integrated and foundational communications in the Catholic society 40 to 50 years ago had a profound impact on how fervently Catholics lived their faith later in lives. The research of Nipa Muangrat (1998) confirms that Thai Catholics who receive religious messages early in life have a higher level of Catholic knowledge, faith and engagement in fervent religious activities.

Both families and individuals in Bangkok are challenged by the changing profile of neighborhoods and the lack of religious conversation and experience on a regular basis. Today we seldom have Catholic neighbors. We no longer hear the sound of the church bells on Sunday morning inviting us to church. Modernization brought about an increase in families in which one parent is Catholic and the other is of another religious tradition. Modern families have no time to care for and educate their children in the traditional ways. The more critical factor facing them today is that they are not prepared to impart knowledge and communicate faith and religion within the family. Thus, our once fertile ground has lost the means for nurturing strong communities of faith in the postmodern world. Yet, we discover that some families do not always go to church. Sunday worship or the liturgical life of the church seems to have lost meaning for some. People seem to accept the rituals of religious practice as a routine without participating in them as a means of nurturing faith and strengthening the community of faith, as was the goal in Catholic Thai villages of years gone by. Furthermore, we find that Catholics in the city have many different Catholic parishes to choose from, and as a result, people no longer have a close bond with any particular parish. People escape quickly after the mass. They return home and do not linger to chat and share news of the faith community because they hardly even know who their co-worshippers are. The powerful moral chastisement that once at least animated conversation among the villagers no longer