

*Neil A. Parent's remarks upon receiving CARA's Cardinal Cushing Medal for Support for Catholic Research on October 30, 2013:*

Thank you Bishop Kicanas for your kind introduction.

I also want to thank you, Fr. Thomas Gaunt, and the rest of CARA board for this recognition, for which I am truly honored. I stand here very humbled because I know of the caliber of those who have preceded me at this podium.

I also want to thank the CARA research staff, namely, Mary Gautier, Mark Gray and Melissa Cidade, all of whom I have worked over the years, especially the last two and one half years on the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership project.

From Mark's presentation you can see the valuable data that was collected to help us better understand how our parishes are in transition, what our leadership needs to better manage those transitions, and how people who are in the pews feel about them.

I would also like to recognize and publically thank Chris Anderson who invited me to direct the Emerging Models project.

It is especially gratifying to me to receive an award in the name of Cardinal Cushing. He was a church leader whom I greatly admired when I first began my theological studies in the early 1960s, which, incidentally, began in Los Angeles and concluded in this very building.

Of course, I wasn't the only one who admired Cardinal Cushing because in August of 1964 he made the cover of *Time Magazine*. In the cover article, he is alternately described as "crusty and contrary." But at the same time, he was also noted as the prelate in the United States who most caught and implemented the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. He was certainly a forerunner on ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

Like Pope Francis, Cardinal Cushing eschewed the trappings of office. For example, he frequently did not wear his pectoral cross. When asked why, he said that he "had enough crosses to bear and didn't need another one hanging around his neck."

In that same article, there is a delightful story of his having traveled to a slum just outside of Lima, Peru, where he helped raise money to erect a new Church. Preaching through a translator on the occasion of the church's consecration, he told the congregation that he assumed that because they were an agricultural society, they knew what and ass is. "The scriptures tell us," he went on to say, "that Jesus rode an ass triumphantly into Jerusalem. Well, today, the Lord comes to you again on an ass – namely, myself."

I think that if Cardinal Cushing were alive today he and Pope Francis would be close buddies.

We are fortunate in the Catholic community in this country to have the research capability we do, especially, as we have seen tonight, in the wonderful work and leadership of CARA. As a practitioner, what has impressed me over the years is that researchers around the country, such as Jim Davidson of Purdue, the late Dean Hoge of Catholic University, Bill D'Antonio, also of CU and present here tonight, not only did their own work but also would frequently collaborate on projects.

A notable example of this collaboration is the recently published *American Catholics in Transition*, which came out this year. It is the fifth report in a series that began 25 years ago in 1987, tracking how American Catholics perceive their Church. Catholics' attitudes toward the Church have dramatically changed in those 25 years, especially so in the case of women.

Bill D'Antonio was the lead author of this book, along with Mary Gautier of CARA and Michele Dillon of the University of New Hampshire. I highly recommend it. It is available on the CARA website, at Amazon, or you can just download it, as I did, into your Kindle or iPad. It is a wonderful read, quite remarkable for its invaluable information.

In recent years I have been intrigued with how modern life, modernity, has influenced us. And because our environment shapes us in a variety of ways, perhaps in ways that we are not even aware of, this influence shapes both how we perceive the Church and our relationship with it.

For example, today in modern society we are very independent and self-directed. And we have to be. We live in a very complex society, and we are expected to make decisions – from what career we follow to our choice of health care plans. And we have to make these decisions; no one else is going to do it for us. So the question becomes for me, how do people who see themselves as self-directed and decision-makers respond when they step into the doors of the Church? Do they feel that they have to put that part of themselves on a shelf?

I think that an answer to that question becomes clear in chapter four of *American Catholics in Transition*, which I cited earlier. According to the authors, the majority of Catholics today reserve final judgment on a variety of moral issues, especially concerning sexual behavior, to themselves rather than accord it to Church authorities. A majority of Catholics today are making the call on whether what they do is morally correct or not.

Another example of how we are being shaped by modern life is that until quite recently we were primarily consumers of information. We got our information through newspapers, magazines, television, and so on. But ever since the advent of the Internet, we have now become producers of information. People today are

creating vast amounts of content through social media, blogs, web pages, You Tube, open source software, self-publishing of both fiction and non-fiction, and, of course, contributing to Wikipedia.

So, we increasingly perceive ourselves as people who can make a difference, who have something to say. But when we turn our eyes to the Church, can we in fact be producers? Can we make a difference to its life and mission? Does the Church welcome us as contributors?

In his book, *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox notes that many of today's spiritual sojourners view the church (and here he means organized religion) as "shrink-wrapped," that is to say, adverse to outside influence. In other words, it presents itself on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Listen to the words of Landon Whitsitt, author of *Open Source Church: Making Room for the Wisdom of All*:

*Given the [Wikipedia] reality, how do we as the church expect to be the least bit appealing to people who increasingly go throughout their day knowing that they can...offer their gifts of knowledge to the world and to generations to come. Yet we expect them to walk into our churches and simply take what's handed to them and do it the way we say they should? I don't think so.*

And, so, the intriguing question for me is, if we are being shaped in certain ways by contemporary life, is our Church able to adapt to us as modern sojourners in the faith?

I attended a symposium on *Faith in a Secular Age* at Catholic University's several years ago. The renowned religious sociologist Charles Taylor was there. He made an appeal for the Church to expand its "tent" to embrace young people, especially Millennials, who bring ideas formed by modernity, so that they can feel welcome in our Church. At that same symposium, Professor Jose Casanova observed that "modernity is not hostile to the faith; modernity is the new host of the faith."

Modernity is indeed where we live. So my hope is that in the coming years the Church will devote more emphasis and invite researchers – and hopefully CARA will be a lead agent in this – to help us better understand who are today's spiritual seekers.

Twenty percent of Americans today say that they don't belong to any religion. How do we address this? I hope researchers will help us, especially practitioners like me in ministry, to better understand the modern spiritual seeker. We need to respond in ways that enable them to feel welcome and motivated to join us in this wonderful Church of ours that we know is a blessing to so many people.

Again, I want to thank the CARA board for tonight's honor, and I wish you all God's blessings.