WHAT IS NEEDED IN CHURCH RESEARCH?

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When I received word that I would be honored with the Father Luzbetak Award, and that my reflections would accompany its receipt, the beginning of this address was immediately clear. At my dissertation defense, my committee knew well of my clear interest in clinical practice. So, one of the committee began his first question with, “Miriam, we know that this is the last piece of research you’ll ever do.” I did not question his assertion. I had no intention of ever doing another research project. Life does hold its surprises!

In that same dissertation, I recalled my dedication “to all who will share with me in the fruits of this adventure” (little did I anticipate the scope of that group) and offered it “in memory of my parents, whose affirmation stretched my vision.” They died very young, but throughout my growing up years encouraged me in my learning and education. I trust that they delight with us on this occasion.

Today, I would like to share with you some reflections on what is needed in Church research. I will not name topics or areas for investigation. Rather, I would like to explore three qualities that any researcher, particularly one interested in Church issues, needs: curiosity, courage, and community.

Curiosity

It seems that curiosity has only recently gotten a lot of press. It has been named as a “feeling” characteristic of sound mental health and, historically, as that quality that killed the cat. (Who, by the way, was revived by satisfaction.) If you examine the lives of predecessors of this honor – Marie Augusta Neal, Dean Hoge, Katarina Schuth and William D’Antonio to name a few – I believe that this would be one of the striking commonalities. It is a healthy curiosity that prompts one to investigate what seem to be “obvious” questions (and, perhaps, come up with not-so-obvious answers) or to connect dots that seem invisible to others.

In Church research, the question, “why is this so?” has not always been met with enthusiasm. We come from a history that has often confused faith and assent to truth with an uncritical and unquestioning stance toward widely-held beliefs. We know history and can cite unhappy outcomes of those who asked un-ask-able questions. Some of those questions exist today. Yet, we are also beneficiaries of those who pursued many of these questions.
Curiosity is an indication of our deep interest in an area of life – of wanting to know more about it, how it works, why it’s so, what influences it. It is not a vendetta to disprove a belief. The usual “research” questions flow from these musings – what are the variables that influence commitment? Are there differences between the ways women and men experience the vows? Is there a relationship between pedophilia and homosexuality?

One of my first experiences in research (post-graduate school) came when some friends and I played with the question of why only 5 out of more than 80 women asked to be available for Province Leadership agreed to let their names stand. Many of us thought we “knew” why – but a few of us said, “let’s see if we’re right.” That project cost less than $50 (including postage and the plastic spiral spines I bought to put together our findings). It yielded information that formed the basis for province-wide conversations concerning our view of leadership, how we treat leaders, and the need to make “leadership attractive.” It paid off. [All three of us involved in the project have held Provincial or Congregational leadership positions.]

When I came to Southdown as Director of Research, my goal was to create a “culture of research.” That is, a culture where any staff member could ask questions about the “why” of what we do or the “so what?” of a practice and we would address the question. Our then CEO used to delight in observing that before I came, folks “knew” the answers to lots of questions. Since my arrival, I’d disturbed that knowledge with data and facts.

Curiosity is important. It need not reshape the whole world. It can.

Courage

In daring to ask previously unasked questions, there is a need for courage. And, I believe, that the courage required for research in the church is needed at (at least) three points:

1. The courage to ask questions;
2. The courage to see the answers;
3. The courage to share the learnings.

Allow me to examine each.

1. **The courage to ask questions.** Asking a question, we’ve often said, is an intervention in and of itself. It can be read as interest in an area (in which we should not be interested because we already “know” the answers) or seen as doubt of already established “facts.” Asking questions can be troubling for those to whom questions are posed insofar as they, too, may be settled in their thinking – or have put that thinking aside.
When we distributed our 10,000 surveys in the Religious Life Futures Project, we received feedback from several individuals that the questions we posed about the vows and religious life moved may to think about – and even lose sleep, for those doing the questionnaire at the end of the day – issues related to their lives that they had not reflected on in recent years. For some, it highlighted their importance; for others, it was simply disturbing.

When the researchers from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in response to the request from the US bishops to investigate the Nature and Scope of Child Sexual Abuse, examined the data they received, they learned that although more than 3,000 cases of sexual abuse of minors were reported between 2001-2004, the overwhelming majority of these incidents of abuse occurred between 1960 and 1985. This piece of information – the finding that most of the recent reports of abuse were between 15-40 years old – stood in stark contrast to the then-popular belief that the Church was rife with abusers.

2. The courage to see the answers. There are times when the answers we get to the questions we ask are not the answers we wanted or expected. A good research project is expected to have “hypotheses” for which supporting data may or may not emerge. Openness to the “may or may not” is important to the process. There are also times when there are unanticipated results. It takes courage when we enter a project convinced of the outcome and begin to see data that contradicts our assumptions or hopes.

While not surprising, in our own Religious Life Futures Project study, we found evidence of a stated commitment to the poor, but also a lack of individual interest in working with the poor. That finding – published as part of our results – was headlined in some papers as “Religious Shun Poor.” (One learning throughout our work was that the person who writes the newspaper story does not write the headline!) Another surprising finding was in response to the question concerning whether religious believed that they were influenced by the culture that surrounds them. The overwhelming response was “no, we are not.” David Nygren and I were so surprised by this result that we re-ran the data a few times to be sure that we were not dealing with a coding or data-entry error.

CARA’s recent work with NRVC that looked at new entrants to religious life provided another example of courage required to “see” the answers. Findings related to what newer entrants were seeking and the types of congregations to which they were attracted were not those which some groups had hoped to discover.
3. **The courage to share the learnings.** In the process of conducting research, there are times when our findings not only surprise the researcher or contradict commonly held beliefs, but also when one knows that the findings will not be popular. This has certainly been true in some circles as researcher after researcher has reported the lack of evidence between a homosexual orientation in clergy and pedophilic tendencies. There is no credible research that has demonstrated a correlation between homosexuality and pedophilia.

In the Religious Life Futures Project, there was much surprise and some consternation when themes such as lack of excellent leadership, diminishment of religious role clarity and absence of corporate identity were linked with negative shifts in demographics of religious congregations – and, particularly, those of women. It is not surprising that, prior to publication, some interested parties tried to discourage us from publishing all our findings. Integrity of researchers founded on their believe in the integrity of the research design and protocol, must shine forth.

**Community**

As was the case for courage, community is required at a variety of points.

1. A good researcher needs a “team” – others who will collaborate with him/her in pursuing the questions that curiosity prompted. Neither David Nygren nor I could have carried out the Religious Life Futures Project alone. Knowing his population, David intentionally sought out a religious woman, trained in the social sciences, to be a partner in this project. (In 1989, I informed him of my minimal research skills (but accompanying delight in working with numbers and agreed to work with him for six months. That ultimately turned into nearly seven years.) Jean Bartunek, RSCJ, also worked with us for those first six months and assisted in the design of the initial phases of the project.

2. The researcher needs a community of support, who will challenge, encourage, and enliven the process. One of the first things David Nygren and I did in outlining the design of the Religious Life Futures Project was to identify an Advisory Board. The group consisted of women and men religious representing the major conferences as well as the USCCB. It also included our Program Officers from the Lilly Endowment Inc., our funding source. We piloted our surveys and workshop strategies with them, used them to consult with their respective organizations, and met regularly as findings emerged. They were also invaluable as we considered ways and means of dissemination.
3. The researcher needs the community to receive his/her findings. This includes scholars who can, with the wisdom of their own disciplines and in keeping with the Catholic intellectual tradition, help to refine the information and knowledge to true wisdom that may be accessed by the people of God.

The “receiving community” also includes those who have been involved in the investigation. Throughout the time of our survey, we heard stories from those who were invited to complete the questionnaire. Several expressed delight in that they were “finally” asked for their opinion on religious life and renewal.

And, there were touching stories. One came in the form of a letter that accompanied a partly-completed survey. In the letter, the individual’s major superior noted that the individual died while in the midst of completing the survey. (He assured us that doing the survey did not kill the member.) Among the last 15 items were those that queried one’s satisfaction with being a religious and whether he/she would make the same life choice. Within minutes before he died, this individual answered “strongly agree” with these items. The responses were part of his funeral Liturgy. Another survey came back blank, with a small hand-written note: “Dear Father and Sister, I am just a cook sister. I do not think I could help you with my responses, but I will pray for you.”

A few days ago, I visited the Women of Spirit exhibit at Ellis Island. Thanks to the research and historical sense of those who saved the information and those who created it, I witnessed a powerful statement of the influence of women religious on the history and development of life in the United States. Not all research is numbers! Briefly put, the aim of research, particularly Church research, is to be practical, useful and, when possible, edifying.

We do not simply collect numbers – data – and stop. The data must yield helpful information, and the information we gather will provide knowledge about the subjects we study. Finally, and with the help of God’s grace and the input from the community around us, this knowledge will lead to wisdom which will help order our lives and celebrate the action of God among us.

CARA’s honoring me today – in the company of such stellar predecessors – has prompted these thoughts. Along with my thanks for your affirmation, I thank you, too, for the call to reflect on these realities. This review led me to a sense of great gratitude for those persons and events who are a part of my own salvation history story. In my dissertation acknowledgements, I concluded with Paul’s words to the Church in Ephesus that I would like to echo today as well: “Glory be to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3:20)