Roman Catholicism: a communication quandary

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For the book, I interviewed 40 Catholics about conflicts they had experienced with church teachings or practices. I should say also that I was raised Catholic and was very involved with the Church until I was about 40 yoa. I have been interested in the problem of the Church’s inability to respond adequately to widespread dissent for some time. I think part of the problem lies in the ways communications between lay people and clergy are conducted.

The church hierarchy invites people to dialogue about issues all the time, and lay Catholics, used to negotiating, collaborating and solving problems in their day-to-day lives, respond to these invitations eagerly, believing that some progress could actually be made. What happens in practice is that there occur essentially two parallel monologues that miss each other on the way up and down the hierarchical ladder – Oxford dictionary has a phrase for this

• ‘dialogue of the deaf’ - A discussion in which each party is unresponsive to what the others say.
• Dialogue - ‘formal discussion between two groups or countries, especially when they are trying to solve a problem, end a disagreement, etc.’

When the Catholic hierarchy invite ‘dialogue’ they appear to mean, to have a discussion or do some research because it is seldom the case that any real action or change follows.

True Dialogue involves more than the ‘discussion’ or ‘conversation’ or even ‘consultation’ part of the definition. It implies that there will be individual and collective actions and behaviours that are responsive and actually solve problems as well.

The structure of a true dialogic process is one in which there is a reciprocity between parties and the movement of interaction is symmetrical, in a kind of pendulum effect between groups: it involves speaking and listening, giving ground and accepting the other’s move to give ground, exhibiting suitable emotional responses and responding to others’ impassioned responses.

However, the conduct of dialogue in Catholicism is restricted by a set of gender-patterned structures and behaviours in which the principles of reciprocity and egalitarianism are not evident (Tentler, 2011). My argument is that existing Roman Catholic structures are such that they inhibit and indeed often prohibit communication practices that would result in
people exercising true response-ability and solving problems. I want to go on and describe these patterned structures and how Catholics’ stories of conflict illustrate them.

Connell referred to gender relations in institutions as their gender regime. From a social interaction point of view, a gender regime may be thought of as 4 inter-dependent types of relationships; i) power relations, ii) production relations, iii) symbolic relations and, iv) emotional relations (Connell, 2002). I am going to describe each of these relationships and how they structure communication patterns.

**Power relations**

Most people would be familiar with the typical aspects of ‘power relations’ which refer to issues of authority, control and coercion. These relations are sustained by human interactions that reflect the social structure. Depending on one’s position, power can be described negatively as the experience of restraint, manipulation, regulation and/or coercion, or positively, as; the ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, or to formulate ideals and define morality (Connell 1987). The Code of Canon Law (Canon Law Society of America 1983) sets the pattern of communicating for Catholics. Basically, each higher figure in the hierarchy may disregard or oppose any decisions or suggestions made by those below him. This policy sets up an asymmetrical pattern for ‘dialogue’ in which all parties may talk, but no-one is obliged to respond constructively or to work on reaching solutions.

Asymmetrical power relations are supported symbolically by images of the Holy Family and Catholic household. The preferred and legitimated interpretation of the Catholic household favours communication patterns that are authoritarian and paternalistic. For instance, a woman religious, Rebekah explained how she rejected the “father’s helper” role set out for her in a parish in favour of living independently and working with the poor and disenfranchised. She was attacked verbally and psychologically by a choreographed meeting of her Order’s leaders for ostensibly besmirching the Order’s reputation. Catholics’ explanations of the communicating behaviours they encountered revealed that they resisted the kind of ‘family’ relations imagery that is un-tempered by any embodied understanding of parenthood and human abilities and frailties.

Adopting a normal adult stance in the broader culture involves asking information gathering questions; how, when, where or what and one can expect considered and informed responses. In the Roman Catholic environment responding is not often an option (think of the ways the homily is presented at mass) and questioning is actively discouraged, and often evaded when it occurs. These interaction patterns thwart attempts to communicate in dialogical ways; to engage in a give and take of understanding based on mutual respect. The formal Catholic Code affords no communicative role that would accommodate such communicative strategies as questioning, mediation or compromise. Power relations are anchored by similar patterns in production relations.

**Production relations**

‘Production relations’ are about the division and allocation of types of labour; mental, physical, emotional and social. Labour relations refer to a gender-structured system of
'production', ‘consumption’ and ‘distribution’ of the institution’s core business. The main work of religions involves preserving tradition, producing orthodox versions of the faith, translating these into social teachings and practices, socialising and educating followers in these tenets and practices, and monitoring their compliance.

There is a close relationship between power relations and the production and control of knowledge (Foucault, 1977). This is nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Josh, a parish priest, who responds to letters from Catholics in a local Catholic newspaper. He came under scrutiny from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) for supposed lack of orthodoxy in his writings but was eventually cleared of wrong-doing. It was not what he wrote that caused the problem but the fact that his advice had appeared in a widely read newspaper rather than hidden away in a theological journal that lay people would be highly unlikely to access. Josh observed that priests are enjoined to be selective about the issues they comment on so as not to disturb ‘the simple faithful’, words he quoted from the CDF. This selective filtering of essential information and denial of guidance is a failure, and possibly also an unwillingness or inability to address issues that concern the faithful.

Catholic discourse conditions people to believe that secrecy, which also is enshrined in Canon Law, is legitimated by divine authority. This phenomenon is supported by the historical cultivation of attitudes of awe and deference towards the sacred authority of priests, silencing any thought (let alone identification) of wrong-doing or inadequacy on their part. Some Catholics talked about how injustices and abuses they perceived were not discussed and were hidden from public view. When communication dynamics silence, evade and bully dissenters, Catholics learn that certain kinds of questions and actions are not only unacceptable but attract social ostracism as well.

As with the interactive patterns of power relations, production relations in the Catholic Church are organised asymmetrically along lay-ordained, female-male, secular-religious lines with the valued emphasis going to the second term in each of these dualisms, that is, the most important jobs are reserved for someone who is male, ordained and religious. Performing the Eucharistic is reserved exclusively for ordained men, taking up the collection for lay people. When considering the laity’s roles in production relations one also has to examine *re-production* relations as part of the collective labour that supports the Church. As primary producers and socialisers of the future work force, souls to be saved and priests to be ordained, women who give birth perform the major proportion of work in ‘re-production relations’. They undertake the unseen and unmarked social, educational and emotional work and provide the reserve army of labour (usually in the form of volunteerism) upon which much of the parish work depends (Mies 1988). Due to their sexually marked difference as pro-creators, all lay people are expected to support re-production relations biologically, intellectually and emotionally. There is thus a *feminised labour* (Morini, 2007) which forms the underside of Catholic social relations and lay people, both men and women, perform it.

Troubled Catholics question the ways that Catholic labour is performed, the content and adequacies of that work and aspects of Catholic teachings that are its products. Often participants encountered leaders lacking the necessary emotional and intellectual skills and unable or unwilling to recognize or respond to lay people’s everyday realities. Iris and Elaine, both subject to highly abusive interpersonal relations, after visiting several Catholic counselors eventually found help from sources outside Catholicism. Elaine, swamped by
feelings of guilt and confusion from which she was unable gain relief, learned that having ‘impure thoughts’ was normal and not sinful. She was enjoying sexual activity outside of marriage and found it healing parts of herself that had been damaged in a physically abusive marriage. Symbolic images and accompanying language usually used to talk about the Holy Family, self-sacrifice and charity were images that justified these women’s tolerance of the abuse they had endured.

Production relations are symbolically and architecturally supported. If a priest wishes to reinforce the emphasis on obedience to papal authority and the letter of the law, the subjective import of his message is mirrored in the physical context; whether that be in the presbytery, confessional or mass. During mass the priest and his young attendants stand in front of the congregation in an area called the ‘sanctuary’ which is ‘holy’, separate and protected from the ‘body’ of the church—that is, where the lay people are. Token women may now enter this sanctuary for limited periods of time during the ceremony to perform particular duties. The positioning of types of persons so that it is clear where the power lies, and where they are positioned in production relations is further enforced by the direction of talk when the priest delivers the moral lesson or homily during Mass. Greg described the situation thus: ‘he (the priest) was ignorant. That he could actually get up in front of the congregation and sort of ah, put his word across as being gospel when everybody has to sit there and listen and ah ... not being able to get up and sort of say something’.

The spatial replication of the oppositional notions of clean/unclean, spirit/body, culture/nature and masculinity/femininity are immediately obvious in the communication patterns of the Eucharistic celebration. Rituals, the biblical stories they replay, the spatial lay-out of churches and who is positioned where, all re-invoke emotionally anchored webs of meaning for Catholics (Riis and Woodhead, 2010). The fear of divine sanction learned in childhood, and the sense of all-pervading guilt that defies location in any ethical reality is re/activated and power relations maintained. Sub-conscious beliefs and tacit understandings of appropriate behaviour are anchored by emotional relations and perpetuate habitual interaction patterns.

**Emotional relations**

‘Emotional relations’ are shaped by the cultural alignment of feminine and masculine characteristics with biological sex and the heterosexual patterning of attraction and repulsion (Connell, 1987). Catholics are enculturated from birth into patterns of emotional attachments and prohibited relations based on values aligned with the heterosexual norm; the attachment of a man to a woman enshrined in the sacrament of marriage, and attachment to their children as their family, modelling the ‘holy family’. Priests are encouraged to transfer this pattern of desire into an attachment to their parishioners as their family but those who discuss the issue talk about the value of, and their need for, close personal friendships. There is pleasure as well as pain in the emotional and psychological work that goes into producing and maintaining Catholic power relations which is why they can be so difficult to change.

Feelings and emotions are natural, part of the givenness of human physiology, as well as barometers of the state of our bodily integrity. Damasio emphasises the role of emotions in human survival. He writes, emotions, ‘... help connect homeostatic regulation and survival ‘values’ to numerous events and objects in our autobiographical experience. Emotions are
inseparable from the idea of reward and punishment, of pleasure or pain, of approach or withdrawal, of personal advantage and disadvantage. Inevitably, emotions are inseparable from the idea of good and evil’ (Damasio, 2000). Strong emotions are sources of moral power (Harrison, 1985). They motivate people to action (Barker, 2007).

Catholics talked about incidents where they were denied the space to express anger, were sanctioned for showing strong negative emotion or were simply met with a non-response. One woman voiced her difficulties in accepting Catholic imagery of the placid Virgin Mary to make sense of her new mothering role in which her predominant feelings were disempowerment, anger and frustration. The experience of anger and frustration is overlaid with a pervasive symbolic meaning. Believers are enjoined to be god-like, ‘slow to anger’; an expression found in several places in the Bible, notably Psalms 103.8 and 105.8 and often preached from pulpits on Sundays. The display of anger or other disrupting behaviours on behalf of subordinates is judged as lacking in Christian virtues. Evading or sanctioning strong emotions and therefore refusing to see the realities that give rise to them is a powerful mechanism for controlling subordinates.

People who are unable to feel, draw energy and can feel renewed and alive in the presence of people who are feeling and/or displaying any kind of emotion. The duality that patterns the concepts of Catholic philosophy/theology also structures symbolic and emotional relations. Laity are to hierarchy as anger is to composure, emotion is to reason, as body is to head, as sex is to spirit, as subordinate is to dominant. Catholics I talked to told of long periods of frustration, anger and conflicting emotions. Some men and women ceased making this kind of emotional investment to maintain their Catholic practice. They removed themselves from contributing to the emotional cycles that energise and sustain established power relations. Many in the hierarchy are believed to lack feelings and emotion and the ability to empathise with the material contingencies of everyday life (McManus, 1991). If Damasio is correct, it may follow that some clergy lack sufficient emotional awareness to cultivate an appropriate moral compass. It is through active listening and empathic communications that people identify shared features of their life-worlds upon which they begin to identify common ground and find ways to address tensions. The lack of a feeling of shared humanity between laity, religious and clergy (is supported by images and relations encoded in the symbolic order.

Symbolic relations

Symbolic relations are informed by imagery in the symbolic cosmos; the triune God imaged by events in Christ’s life, death and resurrection, his relationship to his Father, and the Holy Spirit who was responsible for impregnating the Virgin Mary. Virtues espoused in these narratives are models for the relations between people and encode the communication patterns evident in power, production and emotional relations. For instance, the Virgin Mary is nowhere depicted as questioning the Archangel as to what he was up to. Symbolic relations appear to be ‘natural’ and are largely unexamined positions (Bourdieu, 2001).

Being beyond time/space, yet encapsulating meanings which speak to the Catholic heart, symbols re-activate early patterns of socialisation, be they life-giving or otherwise. Schneiders (2004) explains that ‘root metaphors’ activate experiential material and enable people to make non-literal sense of situations. One of the most favoured metaphors for the
church is that of mother. Catholics are encouraged to develop emotional attachments to the church as children to a mother; and as the parish priest is referred to as ‘Father’ often the relation between lay people to the parish priest is also structured as one of children to a parent. Parent to child communication patterns mirror the permitted types of interaction stipulated in Canon Law.

Motherhood, like no other symbol, provides the conceptual framework for the organisation of **time** that caters to emergent and developmental needs (Adam, 1995). It is therefore a cultural symbol that is capable of engaging the wholeness of human being, responding to personal crises and natural pressures. The Catholic organisation is referred to as Mother Church, and yet it acts like an authoritarian Father Church. There is the oft-quoted platitude, “but the people are the church” when the rhetoric aims to valorise the roles of the faithful but without recognising in any practical way that the **physical and emotional labours** of this ‘body’ are what holds it aloft. Smith explains the gender order well when she writes, ‘… [a]t almost every point women mediate for men the relation between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms on which it depends’ (Smith, 1987). In Catholicism, subordinate males also facilitate this process and together with all women they mediate for many celibates the relation between the spiritual realm and earthly activities where people encounter their human limits. Luke, a former priest echoing other priests’ reflections explained:

> There’s no interconnection between [a priest’s] life-style and what he earns. It’s a whole lot of things that touch people that don’t touch him. And there’s good reasons why I guess he live that way so that he can be free, and not cluttered with other things. So that he’s totally able to be available. But there’s an enormous amount of life that gets missed out.

> … there’s very often a house keeper who does the cooking, washing, cleaning. The supermarket might be to get cigarettes, but it’s not to do the shopping and … meld up what is my income with what I can actually buy … There’s a car. There’s um a— there’s a fairly large protective thing called the church.

It is this “fairly large protective thing”, the idealised mother, linked as it is with individuals’ personal psychology, by which structures of violence are able to be maintained (Porter, 1997). Communication practices anchored by Catholics’ emotional and symbolic attachments to each other conspire towards maintaining the appearance of harmony. Many Catholics are no longer interested in performing the mothering role: managing their own and other’s social and emotional relations so as to help to maintain the appearance of unity in the Church. They demand true dialogue instead of one-way communications which miss each other on the way up or the way down the hierarchical ladder.

**Conclusion**

Communication behaviours are gendered and asymmetrical at all levels in Catholicism; through the structural exertions of power, the structures and values underpinning production and re-production relations, the valorising of rational over emotional responses, and paternalistic interpretations of symbolic relations. The principles of reciprocity and egalitarianism are not evident in the ways communications are structured and habitually reproduced in everyday interactions.
The masculine hegemony sets the rules and manages knowledge and communications in ways that obfuscate their lack of response-ability and failure to act, thus maintaining divisions between lay people and clergy. The laity occupying and performing the diminished foundation of the Church keep adjusting emotionally and managing the chasm between ideal and reality. These parallel communication patterns ensure that discussions between lay and clergy are unlikely to approach true dialogue in which responsibility is assumed and recognised and genuine attempts at problem-solving pursued.

References
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