

CATALYST SUGGESTION SHEET #2

The cultural anthropologist, Edward Hall, makes a provocative observation about modern western culture and the type of thinking that tends to characterize us:

The psychoanalyst Laing is convinced that the Western world is mad. However, it is not man who is crazy so much as his institutions and those cultural patterns that determine his behavior. We in the West are alienated from ourselves and from nature. We labor under a number of delusions, one of which is that we are sane. We persist in this view despite massive evidence to the contrary. We live fragmented, compartmentalized lives in which contradictions are carefully sealed off from each other. We have been taught to think linearly rather than comprehensively Given our linear, step-by-step, compartmentalized way of thinking, fostered by the schools and public media, it is impossible for our leaders to consider events comprehensively or to weigh priorities according to a system of common good [E. T. Hall, Beyond Culture, Anchor Books, 1977, pp.11-12].

The English philosopher, lawyer and political figure Francis Bacon (1561-1626) proposed the theory that knowledge is, in the end, about gaining power over nature. "*We can*," Bacon said, "*put nature to the rack*". Bacon proposed that we gain power over the natural order and in this way provide the necessities for comfort and wellbeing. Bacon's book, The New Atlantis, (1627), envisaged a scientific Utopia. Bacon's philosophy gave impetus to the natural sciences and a way of thinking and knowing that characterizes our Western way of education and living to this day. We tend to think of knowing as gaining control over facts and information. To describe reality is to "harness the facts" - just "the facts" - and present them with "objectivity".

The Englishman in Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Zorba the Greek*, reflects on an experience with a butterfly. In his reflection we find something of the limitations of the rationalistic approach to life in general and to the environment in particular. We also find there intimations of more creative possibilities:

I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in the case preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole body to unfold them. Bending over it I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.

I sat on a rock to absorb this New Year's thought. Ah, if only that little butterfly could always flutter before me to show me the way. [N. Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, Touchstone Books, pp.12-121.]

In the biblical tradition "to know" is to be in some kind of significant relationship with the person or thing known. Thus Jesus says "I know mine and mine know me" (John 10:14). He is not talking about facts or abstract information. He is talking about a certain intimacy of relationship. This intimacy can only be fostered and facilitated, never achieved by conquest. The Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel represents this biblical tradition when he notes:

The teaching of our society is that more knowledge means more power, more civilization - more comfort. We should have insisted in the spirit of the prophetic vision that more knowledge should also mean more reverence, that more civilization should also mean less violence.Knowing is not due to coming upon something, naming and explaining it. Knowing is due to something forcing itself upon us. Thought is a response to being rather than an invention. The world does not lie prostrate, waiting to be given order and coherence by the human mind. Things are evocative. When conceits are silent and all words stand still, the world speaks. We must burn the cliches to clear the air for hearing. Conceptual cliches are counterfeit; preconceived notions are misfits. Knowledge involves love, care for the things we seek to know, longing, being-drawn-to, being overwhelmed. [Abraham Heschel, Who Is Man?, Stanford University Press, 1965, p.100 & 109.]

Blaise Pascal's comment is well known to all of us, though not always accurately quoted:

The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing; we feel it in many things [Blaise Pascal, Pensées, Trans, J. Warrington, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973, n.224].

Give some thought to the way you think. *How* you think is probably as important as *what* you think. It will affect your ability to enter into good conversation. Observe other people and try to understand the way they think. Have conversations about this with others.

What difference do you think it might make to the way you approach the issues pertaining to Church renewal?

See the reverse side of this sheet for further stimulating ideas on thinking.

Suggested Reading

E. Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Vintage Books, 1971.

H. Smith, *Beyond the Post Modern Mind*, Crossroad, 1982.
M Whelan, *Without God All Things are Lawful*, Society of St Paul, 1995.

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THREE STYLES OF THINKING

[These categories are descriptive rather than definitive. They are given to stimulate thought and conversation. For good adult conversation - especially in the context of Church renewal - Foundational Thinking is generally preferable to Ideological Thinking and Issues Thinking - though the latter is most definitely required in certain concrete situations.]

FOUNDATIONAL THINKING

- begins from the standpoint of wanting to search for the truth;
- seeks context, recognizing all relevant factors;
- is subtle, able to make relevant distinctions;
- asks honest questions, probes; in particular asks "What is happening?"
- unveiling the truth is everything;
- listening in order to learn is of the essence;
- language is generally unencumbered by extraneous agenda, words chosen to facilitate connection and conversation;
- never resorts to mockery or sarcasm, always focuses on the ideas, questions and issues;
- respect and care for the other as co-searcher, though non-emotive;
- willing to leave the matter incomplete, agree to disagree;
- high tolerance for disagreement;
- high tolerance for ambiguity and paradox;
- high regard for principles and the logic they demand;
- assumes that the truth will set us free;
- able to root a conversation in the depth dimension;
- presupposes life experience and some wisdom;
- requires depth of emotional maturity and significant sense of personal security;
- it probably helps to be humble;

- is self-transcending.

IDEOLOGICAL THINKING

- begins from the standpoint of already knowing the truth;
- the ideology is the template for addressing any factor;
- is unsubtle, disinclined to make distinctions, paints with broad brush;
- makes definite and clear statements;
- "winning" is everything;
- out-maneuvering the other in order to defend your position is of the essence;
- language is generally loaded, words chosen to defend or promote the ideology and or demolish the opposition;
- at home with mockery and sarcasm, prone to ad hominem argument;
- anxiety about the other as threat, emotive;
- determined to bring the matter to a close with a victory;
- low tolerance for disagreement
- all is clear, no tolerance for ambiguity or paradox;
- high regard for the ideology and the logic it demands;
- assumes that the ideology will set us free;
- interaction remains essentially superficial;
- presupposes cleverness rather than wisdom and probably lack of life experience;
- generally implies emotional immaturity and lack of significant sense of personal security;
- it probably helps to be proud;

- is egocentric.

ISSUES THINKING

- begins from the standpoint of wanting to solve the problem;
- context is typically bypassed except where it is useful in solving the problem;
- subtlety and distinctions have little or nothing to do with it;
- maybe asks clarifying questions;
- solving the problem is everything;
- functional and practical cooperation is of the essence;
- language is generally detached and technical, words chosen to convey necessary information;
- mockery and sarcasm may emerge when the problem solving is frustrated, product oriented;
- acceptance of other as helper in solving the problem, non-emotive;
- keen to find the solution to the problem;
- disagreement irrelevant so long as the problem is solved;
- little tolerance for ambiguity or paradox;
- high regard for the matters of fact and realpolitik;
- assumes that the solution will set us free;
- interaction remains essentially superficial
- presupposes skills of one kind or another;
- maturity and sense of personal security have little or nothing to do with it;
- humility does not matter;
- get it fixed!