PARALITURGICAL STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS?

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This paper will speak of certain exercises of popular piety under the label of "paraliturgical states of consciousness" and will discuss these in the context of the liturgical renewal mentioned in recent Church documents.

On Dec. 4, 1988, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the conciliar constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II said: "An authentic pastoral promotion of the Liturgy will build upon the riches of popular piety, purifying and directing them towards the Liturgy as the offering of the people." (The context includes exercises even of peoples other than Christian peoples.)

Four years earlier, a document of the Episcopal Commission on Liturgy of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, entitled "Twenty Years of Liturgical Renewal in the Philippines" (on III-d), speaks of "dramatizations . . . presided over by lay ministers. The few reports received speak enthusiastically on the effect of such messages at such occasions."

A particular form of dramatization by a lay minister includes psychologists call an "altered state of consciousness." Although this state resembles a trance and has been called a "trance-behavior," still it is not necessarily a hysterical behavior. In dramatization, the trancer remains in control of his/her behavior, is responsible for the underlying motive, even though s/he coherently explain the experience. In some cases of course, there are pathological symptoms and/or worldly motives. The proliferation of fanatic cults reveals cravings for emotional associated with pseudo-liturgical practices. This has resulted
in many cases of addiction and many innocent devotees become easy prey for the unscrupulous profiteers who promote such pseudo-religious liturgies. Authentic liturgy must be diligently protected and purified of such abuses.

The reports of trance-like behavior of either kind, whether authentic or unauthentic, has led to many discussions. To broaden participation in the discussions, one conversation is reproduced here in summary form:

A CONVERSATION

Priest: According to the Guidelines of the Catholic Charismatic Movement in the Archdiocese of Manila, leaders of prayer groups are advised thus: "They should promptly act and stop any person who seems to be possessed supposedly by a Saint, the Sto. Niño, e.g., etc. Any trance-like or hysterical behavior should be dealt with and corrected."\(^1\) I find this advice useful particularly in cases where there are harmful effects. For example, in a case condemned in a circular of the Manila Archdiocese, a woman attracted a large cultic following because people were led to believe that she, while in trance, was mysteriously possessed by God. The people were hungering precisely for this kind of emotional experience.

Psychologist: Yes, I am familiar with that case and many similar cases. Disillusioned followers have come to me and told me about the many harmful effects of such activity. I have heard testimonies of large amounts of money involved without any reliable accounting. I have heard of adulterous unions being blessed by the possessing spirit.

Priest: I hear that they justify this policy by appealing to the Catholic doctrine of divine indwelling.

Psychologist: Just what do they mean by divine indwelling?

Priest: I do not know exactly what they mean. But in Catholic doctrine, divine indwelling refers to a special permanent presence of God in one who is living the life of grace.\(^2\)

Psychologist: How would Church authorities judge whether the

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A eged indwelling is authentic or not?

Priest: There are many ways by which an interior life of grace is manifested by exterior signs. One way is by its fruits. As our Lord says: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." (Mt 7:15-16).

Psychologist: But it is precisely by their fruits that the followers of this particular woman claim to have been attracted in the begin-

" "g . . .

Priest: In the beginning, yes. At first, all that is visible is the sheep's clothing." There are stories of sudden conversions and miraculous cures. Some may be true. It is only later — sometimes much later — that the inward reality of "ravenous wolves" comes to view. Then the Church is obliged to act decisively.

Psychologist: Too late, sometimes. Much harm has already been done before the hidden evil is belatedly revealed by official circu-

That is why I think it is wise for the Church to prevent and correct all trance-like behavior.

Priest: Actually, the Guidelines did not exactly say that all trance-like behavior is hysterical behavior. Hysterical behavior must of course be corrected. Trance-like behavior need only be dealt with." At least, this is how I would personally interpret a statement in the Guidelines. I base my interpretation on the proposition that there is a distinction between "trance-like" and "hysterical."

Psychologist: I admit that there is a distinction. Hysteria involves a state of dissociation that is pathological, that is, when the subject is not in control. But a well-controlled behavior performed with intense concentration and freedom from distraction certainly resembles a trance and is correctly called "trance-like behavior."

This is the desired behavior of dramatic artists, orators, preachers,raphic singers, and this has powerful effects on their audience, so they are by no means pathological, because they remain in control.

Priest: You mention preachers. I do remember instances when, preaching a prepared sermon, I feel inspired to depart from the prepared text and to say things that I had not thought of be-

"Guidelines," 17.
forehand. And yet, the effect on the congregation was more powerful than if I had just stuck to the prepared text. This is a common experience in the preaching ministry. Such behavior cannot be pathological.

Psychologist: Of course not. And there is an account of a talented operatic singer who finds, on the night of particularly powerful performances, that she sometimes surfaces in a shock of surprise with "no clear memory of having sung an aria that, according to the ongoing music, she must have just completed."¹

Priest: That is a beautiful example of "trance-like behavior" that I hope we can somehow incorporate into the liturgy. Some instances of trance-like behavior are of course harmful and must not be permitted. But a blanket condemnation of all trance-like behavior would not be wise either.

Psychologist: Maybe. But I favor the policy of forbidding a trance-like behavior in prayer sessions because it is safer to forbidd this than to try to discern whether the trancer is credible, authentic, honest, sincere, pure of heart, etc. Subjectivity gets into the discernment and many are incapable of correct discernment and can easily be made to believe that there is divine indwelling in the trancing woman, such that every single word she utters is a divine revelation, and every single command she gives must be obeyed unto death. And the personal nature of their relationship makes them feel that they are getting closer to God. Before, they felt that they are praying to an impersonal God and are not even sure whether they are heard or not. Now, there is a person close enough to know their intimate problems and show them concrete solutions. Let us face it. This is much easier to accept and believe than the old, standard teachings of the Church.

Priest: Yes, let us face it. But we cannot completely face it with a policy of safety first and safety only, as though we were insecure about introducing liturgical innovations. The Church has already taken the risk of introducing the vernacular in place of the old Latin readings and prayers at Mass. This has made it somewhat easier for people to understand the "old, standard teachings." But the liturgy has still remained rather foreign for people less familiar:

Psychologist: Are you suggesting that trance-like behavior be introduced as a way of inculturation of the liturgy?

Priest: Well, I am not too clear. Something like that perhaps.

Psychologist: But how would you introduce trance-like behavior, for example, in the celebration of the Mass?

Priest: I confess I cannot get down to specific proposals. This must be studied more deeply. For now, all I know is that one man, dramatically impersonating Christ at the Last Supper in a trance-like behavior before her cultic followers, has been more successful than I in communicating my eucharistic devotion to my congregation. The emotions produced by her trance-like behavior are so intense that after a while her followers were prepared to give up their lives and possessions at her command when in a trance, whether real or fake. In contrast, I notice that some people leave the church for a smoke the moment I start my sermon during Mass.

Psychologist: But would you permit a lay man or a lay woman to pontificate a prayer group with dramatic costumes, props, dim lighting, etc., and pretend to reveal divine teachings?

Priest: Of course, the teachings have to be doctrinally correct and not mere pretensions. Let me recall one particular lay man who used to preach while in a trance-like state and many people were attracted to his trance preaching. On one occasion, I noticed an error in what he was narrating. Privately, I called this error to his attention while not in trance. The next day, while in trance, he corrected the error. Apparently, he trusted my priestly authority and freely chose a policy of obedience to my guidance, and his conscience was operative even during trance.

Psychologist: That sounds fine. But would you say that that is typical among trancers?

Priest: No, I am afraid not. Most trancers ignore or reject priestly guidance, even as they utilize the propaganda value of priestly presence. Some are openly hostile to Church interference. But as a psychologist, would you rule out any possibility of constructively utilizing trance-like behavior under official guidance?

Psychologist: Theoretically, if the trancer is religiously motivated and therefore obedient to Church authorities, a priest can be assistant to him or her in the liturgical and preaching ministry. But in practice, this would demand so much psychic research and spiritual assessment that most parish priests would not have enough time
and skill to undertake such experimentation. Not for the present anyway.

Priest: This suggests a positive interpretation of how, in the words of the present Guidelines, trance-like behavior can be “dealt with,” not outlawed, not absolutely forbidden, but put in the service of authentic spirituality in carefully guided experimental groups.

Psychologist: Experimentation sounds fine, but will the Church permit it? Or will Church workers have the training and the time for it?

Priest: Actually, experimentation has been going on for centuries, ever since the time of our animist ancestors. Pre-hispanic babaylans used to dramatize events believed to be happening in the world of spirits. But this was repugnant to the cultural tastes of European missionaries, and later, of Europeanized Filipinos, and was pronounced superstitious and pathological.

Psychologist: Even today, many instances of trance-like behavior would appear pathological to me.

Priest: People educated in foreign tastes find indigenous tastes repugnant. Expressions of repugnance can produce imbalances in indigenous cultures that would otherwise be healthy.

Psychologist: Aren’t you caricaturing cultural contrasts rather simplistically?

Priest: I confess I do have some deep-seated biases. But I am vaguely hoping that the scientific and spiritual resources of the Church could be more constructively harnessed to correct some imbalances.

Psychologist: Perhaps this is because Church workers cannot possibly reach those who have been culturally driven underground.

Priest: Add to that the difficulty that many priests and catechists feel ill-equipped to cope with this phenomenon.

Psychologist: I hear that some seminaries now give their seminarians opportunities to attend lectures and exercises of altered states of consciousness under the guidance of competent psychologists. These techniques are included in their courses in counselling.

Priest: In a few years from now, our newly ordained priests will be better equipped than we older priests to "deal with" trance-like behavior and to utilize them in a more dynamic liturgy. The many communities for whom vivid dramatization have a great appeal will be won over by such dynamic liturgy.

Psychologist: Won over from whom?

Priest: From occultist syndicates that exploit people. Right now, it seem to have a near-monopoly, maybe about ninety percent, of trance-like liturgies.

Psychologist: These unscrupulous exploiters are sometimes abetted openly or secretly, by ex-priests or interdicted priests, who are not averse to sharing the loot of the syndicated exploiters. For example, without valid permission, they say Mass at these gatherings and thus give the impression that these gatherings are approved by the Church.

Priest: Most people do not bother to examine the credentials of such priests. They would not even understand the need for a priest to have the "faculties" of the diocese and the permission of the priest in order to exercise the priestly ministry in a given place, whether in a chapel, or in a private building, or outdoors.

Psychologist: Perhaps they know that permission would not be granted anyway if trance-like behavior is known to occur at certain gatherings.

Priest: And Church officials learn about it only after it has been reported by disillusioned participants, especially those from whom financial donations have been obtained or extorted, and those discover the hidden disturbances of the trancer.

ASK FOR PASTORAL THEOLOGY

The conversation reported above concerns cases observed in the archdiocese, but similar cases are also reported in other dioceses both here and abroad. Many more details, whether positive or not, have published reports of deviant cults employing trance-like exercises similar to those discussed in the conversation. For example, Joan Carol Ross and Michael Lane co-authored a book entitled Cults: What Parents Should Know (New York: C. M. Sheing Group, 1988) that says on p. 27 that one cult gave instructions in trance-setting techniques including self-hypnosis in order to effect "conversion." Observations are made by Rachel Andres and James R. Lane who edited a book entitled Cults and Consequences (Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles,
or negative, have been brought out in such conversations, but those mentioned above make it sufficiently clear that the pastoral problem involves a "dialectic"; two cultural horizons are in conflict about a decision to permit or not to permit trance-like behavior in paraliturgical exercises. This dialectic is rooted in the preference for the "dramatic pattern of experience" in one culture and for the "intellectual pattern of experience" in the other culture. ⁹

For now, because of the danger of abetting fanatic cults, it may be prudent to postpone articulating a general policy. But decisions on a case-to-case basis may be guided by explicitating ways of "dealing with" people involved in such exercises.

To do this, it is helpful to classify two classes of trancers and two classes of trance-believers and to articulate the focus of pastoral concern for each of the four classes. Pastoral concern for a worldly trancer must focus on conversion from his/her worldly values. Pastoral concern for a non-worldly trancer must focus on obedience to a spiritual director with adequate training in psychology and discernment of spirits. Pastoral concern for followers who exploit trance-like behavior for worldly motives must focus on overcoming their inordinate attachment to worldly benefits.

Pastoral concern for gullible believers in false indwelling must focus on educating them about the nature, advantages and limitations of the dramatic component of trance-like behavior.

Of the four classes of people involved in trance-like behavior, the most numerous is the class of gullible believers in false indwelling. Their gullibility is often the result of their hunger for God, or their intense desire to converse intimately with God. They are like sheep without a shepherd. They are in great need of help.

This is a pastoral task of some importance. It includes aspects of psycho-drama and theo-drama that are not yet too well understood, especially when these occur in combination. Psycho-drama is a therapeutic technique by which interior impulses of disturbed patients are analyzed and explained to them. "Theo-drama" is a term borrowed from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s book so entitled:

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⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1972) 235-37 and 286. Lonergan’s analytical tools are mentioned here as helps in reflecting on a concrete reality and are not meant to exaggerate the contrast between Filipino *ilustrado* and *plebe* cultures.

¹⁰ According to Von Balthasar, "... a natural dramatic dimension is presupposed by, and prefaced to, the supernatural drama, which adopts it after having first clarified..."
intended in the present context to refer to the dramatic sym-

s used by indigenous trancers to communicate their experiences

of various movements of spirits.

When people are being moved by spirits, it is of utmost impor-
tance to discern whether the moving spirits are good or evil. If the-

cological discernment is lacking, the “messages” are misunderstood

by the trancers and/or by their audience. Nor would theological
guidance be adequate unless it is inculturated for that specific com-

munity.

Furthermore, theological guidance is required if the liturgical

dramatization is to succeed in producing “catharsis” or a sense of

purification. Any unconscious rejection of teachings of the Church

screws this catharsis. Thus, serious difficulties confront this pasto-

ral task and call for systematic and empirical investigation.

The tragedy is that these difficulties are ignored by the cultists

to exploit popular interest in liturgical dramatizations. Only

if the inculturation is being better appreciated by church work-

ers can we hope that the fanatic cultists will be displaced and that

official help can take the form of carefully supervised experimen-
tations. In due time, these may yet reveal liturgical possibilities

creative insights towards dealing with the transcultural and

broader aspects of this pastoral problem.

and brought it to its true proportions.” (Theo-drama: Theological


This insight looks promising. Its concrete meaning can best be grasped by participating

in exercises of popular piety that include trance-like dramatizations. The popularity

of these dramatizations points to the possibility of clarifying, transforming and bringing

them to their true proportions as culturally fitting preambles of a supernatural drama.