

'Let the Word alone do the Work': Mimetic Theory Goes to Church

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The seeds of this paper were born last June during the COV&R conference at Ghost Ranch in Northern New Mexico. We were privileged to attend an afternoon session led by Rev. Paul Nuechterlein on Mimetic Theory and Pastoral Ministry. As we sat outdoors under a sun shade in the dry desert wind, the gathering of ordained pastors, Christian educators and lay people, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, discussed how to apply the insights of René Girard's Mimetic Theory in our work with congregations. How might Girard's theory assist pastors and parishes to avoid the spiraling path into conflict which is so often resolved via the scapegoating mechanism? How might we teach a complex theory so that its intuitive insights about the human being, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, the wisdom of Paul, the foolishness of the cross and the intelligence of the victim might take root in people's hearts? We emerged from that session with many questions and few answers, but with new friends and colleagues who encouraged us to pursue the questions and come to Germany this summer.

In the ensuing year we have returned to these questions time and time again. We serve an affluent, North American Protestant church with roots in the English Congregational tradition. The congregation has a history of conflict which leads to the periodic expulsion of its pastors or members through precisely the mechanisms Girard describes---all in the name of the good of the community or in pursuit of a just cause. In

that, it is similar to most communities of faith, because communities of faith are comprised of human beings, and even a Christian community's proximity to the Gospel is no guarantee that the Gospel's wisdom will be detected; indeed the wisdom of God appears as foolishness in the eyes of the world (I Corinthians 1: 18-25).¹ This particular congregation, like many American mainline Protestant congregations, lived some of its life far from the Gospel, as it pursued a typically American gospel of social activism. Slowly, the congregation is reclaiming its proximity to the Gospel---and finding ample inspiration for the work of love and justice in Jesus' name. The congregation has been introduced to the work of Girard through the ministry of our late colleague Rev. David Owens and through the visits of our friend Gil Bailie. But introducing the work of Girard and internalizing it is not one and the same. And more importantly, introducing the Gospels in liturgy or in a classroom is not the same as internalizing the foolish wisdom of the cross.

There are plenty of strategies abroad which promise to instill in Christians purpose-driven lives, highly effective habits, or a passion for doing justice. We receive mailings about these programs for spiritual formation or social transformation every day. But we aren't attending these programs; we are affiliated with COV& R. Why? Because we believe that Mimetic Theory and its insights about the Gospel offer wisdom regarding catechesis and spiritual formation.²

¹ Here and elsewhere we quote from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English.

² We are assuming a familiarity with Girard's theory on the part of our readers. For readers who seek a summary of Girardian theory in English, see the forward by James G. Williams in Girard's most recent work: René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) ix-xxiii, or the 'Overview of Mimetic Theory' in James G. Williams, ed. *The Girard Reader* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1996). Also helpful are James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1998) 9-21, and Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1997).

Our question is not how to help the members of our parish manage their time or pocketbooks so as to be more efficient or even more socially responsible. Our question comes from a phrase preached by our Protestant ancestor Martin Luther in his Eight Sermons at Wittenberg. Luther said:

"...preach and teach, and let the Word alone do the work. The Word must first capture the hearts of the people and enlighten them. We will not be the ones who will do it. Therefore the apostles magnified their ministry, and not its effect."³

So, preach and teach and let the Word alone do the work, Luther advises. We don't doubt the power of the Word to do its work. But Girard cautions that we humans are plenty capable of obstructing the Word with our mimetic rivalries and scapegoating solutions. Preachers and teachers are especially good at equating themselves *with* the Word, instead of opening a space *for* the Word. The question becomes not how to teach Girard's theory to adults, but how to apply the insights of Girardian theory and model it in our work with children *and* adults, so that as pastor and educator we train ourselves to 'let the Word alone do the work' in the sanctuary and in the classroom, and train lay liturgists and teachers to do the same.

So what can happen when we take Girard's Mimetic Theory to church? How can it help us as we seek to form Christians in the imitation of Christ? We need to start with some basic theological premises that we confess each day. First, imitation of Christ is possible (Ephesians 5: 1-2). Here we confess a particular view of grace and a particular anthropology. First, we confess that there is a Word or an Other or a Giver who desires to gift us with life, relate to us in love, and reclaim us when our desires lead away from

³ John Nicholas Lenker, ed., Sermons of Martin Luther (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988)

the gift of this life and this love.⁴ And this God, revealed in the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and most specifically in the foolishness of the cross, is not the god of the philosophers or of myth or of Nuremburg.⁵ This pacific, self-giving Other is not an idol who reflects our gaze but an icon who points us beyond ourselves to what we cannot master and will never grasp, an Other whose gaze toward us is never one of objectification but one of absolute benevolent delight. And we confess that through God's grace and through the process of conversion, our desires can be formed in imitation of this benevolent desire, so that we can consent not to grasp but to be grasped, not to name but to be named, not to interpret but to be interpreted, not to gaze but to allow ourselves to be gazed upon and fully known by the Word, the Other, the Giver (I Corinthians 13: 12).

Girard's anthropology and theology has been articulated most cogently by James Alison, from whom we learn that a transformation of our desire is possible, a transformation that leads us away from the desire to dominate and destroy our model-obstacles and toward the desire to emulate the self-giving love of the victim revealed on the cross. Further, Alison suggests that the patterning of our desire after the self-giving Other is truly anterior to a desire distorted by mimetic rivalry, such that there may truly

⁴ On God as the 'anterior Other' see James Alison, [The Joy of Being Wrong](#), 110. On God as Word and Giver, see Jean-Luc Marion, see [God without Being](#), trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991) particularly chapter five, 'On the Eucharistic Site of Theology' for discussion of Word and chapter six (*hors-texte*), 'The Present and the Gift' for discussion of Gift/Giver. See also Marion, [Being Given; Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness](#), trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), Book V, § 26, 'To Receive Oneself from what Gives Itself.'

⁵ For Marion on the death of the god of the philosophers, see [The Idol and Distance: Five Studies](#), trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001). For Girard on the god of myth, see [I See Satan Fall Like Lightning](#), particularly part II. For Alison's description of the idolatry of the 'gods of Nuremburg' see his *Worship in a Violent World: A talk for Ceiliuradh*, Dublin, 16 June 2003. Accessed at www.cccdub.ie/conference/ceiliuradh-2/ceiliuradh-2-alison.html.

be a state of grace, not chronologically, but ontologically.⁶ Our work with young children suggests this, as we will explore later in the paper.

So what we are pursuing is the question of "transforming our receptivity" such that "our desire becomes a desire from and for God."⁷ And the question is not *if* this is possible, but *how*, as pastor and as teacher, we can help make it possible in the lives of the Christians we serve. This transformed receptivity can be recovered through revelation and through conversion (in Protestant terms, by grace through faith). We might understand grace as the anteriority (the Other, the Given) which forgives us our scandals and seeks to form us in a purely non-rivalistic self-giving desire. And we might understand faith as a conversion, a "learning to relax into the suggestion of the other 'Other'" so that we settle into this pattern of peacefully imitating the desire of the peaceful, self-giving Other.⁸

How does this recovery, this transformed receptivity take place? As Luther suggests, through 'letting the Word alone do the work.' We learn to 'let the Word alone do the work' through spiritual disciplines of listening to and responding to the Word. Alison suggests that "there are real human patterns of behavior to be learned as part of the suggestion of our new 'self' into being."⁹ What are these real human patterns, or spiritual practices? We want to highlight two practices, suggested by Girard via Alison, and also by Marion, whose work we honor at this colloquium. These two practices, so

⁶ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 61.

⁷ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 46.

⁸ Here, Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, notes "The process of faith in the life of the person is therefore precisely this learning to relax into the suggestion of this other 'Other,' a process that is arduous because what is being undone is the way in which our selves are formed and constituted by the 'worldly' other, which is at many points in denial of the peaceful mimesis, which is the new 'Other's' way into us," 60.

⁹ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 57.

important for a pastor and an educator, and for lay liturgists and lay teachers, are the monotheism which prevents idolatry and the relaxation which prevents mimetic rivalry.

First, we explore the practice of monotheism which prevents idolatry, intended to guard against the danger of confusing others with the Other, of confusing gifts with the Giver, or of idolizing our models, who then become our obstacles. For Jews and Christians the practice of monotheism is described in the opening and closing commandments of the Decalogue:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" *and* "Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Deuteronomy 5: 6-7, 21)

The Decalogue begins with the command to have no other gods before God. Why? To honor other gods, to engage in the practice of idolatry prohibited in the second commandment (Deuteronomy 5: 8) would be to fall back into precisely the kind of slavery that God has freed us from, not a slavery in Egypt, but a slavery to our own mimetic desires. Therefore this misplaced mimetic desire is strongly cautioned against in the tenth commandment. Why? To desire what our neighbor has is to turn our neighbor into a god, a god who easily becomes our rival and obstacle, such that we are led into conflict and violence. In order to guard against this, we are led back to the first commandment, crystallized in the doxological proclamation of the *Shema*:

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6: 4-5)

Our liturgy and prayers serve as guards against idolatry. For Jews, this comes in the liturgical proclamation of the *Shema*. For Christians, this comes in the *Gloria Patri* and the *Doxology* as we direct our glorification and praise away from ourselves to the God

revealed as Trinity. In the Lord's Prayer (the prayer Jesus taught), we echo his prayer in Gethsemane, "Thy will be done" (Mark 14: 36) as we seek to align our desires with God's.

The practice of monotheism allows us to look away from our own victimization (no matter how real or heinous it has been) toward the innocent victim who forgives his own victimizers from the cross (Luke 23: 34) and who teaches us to forgive seven times over (Luke 17: 4). As Alison notes, if Christians are permitted any image of God, it is only the image of God as the human victim, for it is this image alone that we can never idolize or appropriate, because the image of the human victim always haunts us such that it holds before us our need of forgiveness.¹⁰ But if the practice of monotheism points us away from idolatry, even the idolatry of our own victimization, and haunts us with our need of forgiveness, will we not find ourselves in a perpetual state of agitation such as that which compelled Luther in his dark nights of the soul? On the contrary, it is this very practice of monotheism, centered on the icon of the human victim, which opens a way for us to see beyond idolatry and the agitation of mimetic rivalry. When we discover in the Gospels and in liturgy our own forgiven-ness for our complicity in the suffering of innocent victims, we can confess our need for forgiveness and learn to forgive others. And through this, we learn the practice of relaxation away from mimetic-rivalry.

Through the practice of monotheism, we learn to give praise to the Other who creates us. We learn that we do not have to create our own being through accumulation of things, domination over others, or idolization of or rivalry with model-obstacles (in fact, we cannot). We learn that we already are, and already are loved, and thus we can learn the practice of relaxation. Through our liturgy (in the acts of the Prayer of

¹⁰ Alison, [The Joy of Being Wrong](#) 58.

Confession and Words of Assurance) we learn to relax into the suggestion that God loves us as we are. Thus begins the practice of relaxation away from mimetic-rivalry.

Forgiveness, and the acceptance of our forgiven-ness, is at the heart of this relaxation.

But even though the possibility of relaxing into the gracious embrace of the self-giving Other is ontologically secured, our realizing it is not, because this realization is so dependent on our confession of ourselves not simply as victims but as victimizers of the self-giving Other. Because this realization and confession is something we seek to avoid, it is entirely possible for our desire to be lived purely as idolatry.¹¹ Here we need the practices of monotheism (away from idolatry) and relaxation (away from mimetic rivalry) to help us 'let the Word alone do the work' within us and within our congregations. We are particularly interested in how Girard's insights help us to 'let the Word alone do the work' in leading the liturgy of the sanctuary or the lessons of the classroom. For a few moments we will explore these practices in relation to liturgical leadership, and then explore them in relation to classroom leadership.

What do we learn from Mimetic Theory regarding liturgical leadership? First, that our pursuit of the perfect liturgy can conceal a preoccupation with power. American Protestant churches, especially those with roots in the free-church tradition, love to tinker with liturgy. This can be done for good causes: we want to name God better, or remind ourselves that God is beyond all naming; we want to emphasize that Eucharist is not a sacrifice, at least not a sacrifice that we have to offer to God but one that has been offered, once and for all, for us.¹² We want to attend to and incorporate the songs and

¹¹ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* 47.

¹² See Williams in his Foreword to *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*: "[The Gospel]...takes the side of the innocent victim, who gives himself over to God and lets himself suffer and die because of Satan's work, because of the victim mechanism, that those who believe in him may have their

prayers of Christians throughout the world, particularly those who have encountered the Gospel in a non-European, non-North American context.

But this inclination can easily go awry. We start to tinker with the liturgy so that it reflects our theological or personal or social or political agenda. Our tinkering can evince a reluctance to confess but a willingness to accuse. Our tinkering can be a grasping after the 'best' way of doing things, which prevents us from relaxing into the knowledge that we are already grasped by God, who does not even need our praise, let alone our perfection. Ultimately our tinkering can be totalitarian: if the liturgy is always in the unpredictable hands of the presider, it is not the work of the whole people of God.

Thomas J. Talley describes it thus:

"Those of us who were deeply involved in historical, theological and pastoral consideration of the liturgy are, by this very fact, virtually incapable of leaving it alone. Loving it, we fondle it until it is misshapen. Certain that with a bit more planning it can be somehow 'better' next Sunday than last, we deny the assembly the one thing that it desperately needs: immersion in a ritual pattern whose authority, dimly understood but powerfully experienced, transcends our own ingenuity, erudition and energy."¹³

We might liken this need for immersion in a 'pattern dimly understood but powerfully experienced' to Girard's notion of external mediation, articulated in his exploration of the novel. As contrasted with internal mediation, in which the desires of the subject and the model overlap and thereby come into rivalry, with external mediation:

"the model or mediator is removed from the individual (whether historically, ontologically, or however) and so there is no competition for an object of desire."¹⁴

eyes and hearts opened and be saved. And those who henceforth 'eat' his flesh and blood renounce any participation in killing the innocent victim and feast on the spiritual body of love and forgiveness he has offered them" (xiv).

¹³ Thomas J. Talley, *Worship: Reforming Tradition* (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1990) as quoted in Gabe Huck, ed., *Liturgy: A Sourcebook* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) 82.

¹⁴ See *The Girard Reader*, 39, 291.

The external mediation of Christian liturgy depends on symbols and rites that are not mythical but ancient, so historically removed that they do not become obstacles or rivals for us. The presider is less likely to become a model-obstacle in the liturgy if he is willing to consent to pray following the ancient patterns of the church. This is not to say that there is one pristine pattern of prayer, but that there is wisdom in relaxing into a historically grounded pattern which is practiced week-by-week.¹⁵

It is important to distinguish the external mediation of Christian liturgy from the rites of the scapegoating mechanism which culminate in ritual sacrifice. For Christians, the external mediation of liturgy must be dependable but not fascinating: liturgy is not aimed at centering attention on ourselves or on the scapegoat, but on God (the innocent victim). Christian worship is not intended to fascinate us, to thrill us, to stir up emotions of solidarity around a scapegoat, or to take us outside ourselves so that our complicity in the suffering of the victim is concealed. Christian worship is meant to calm us, relax us, take us deeper inside ourselves so that our complicity in the suffering of the victim is revealed, and so that we can confess our complicity and understand ourselves as forgiven, that we might be free to praise God.¹⁶

What does this mean for the liturgical leader? The leader must resist the temptation to charm, entertain, or compete for the affection of the crowd. Rather, the leader must attempt to point beyond him or herself to the object of desire which is God, in the hopes of allowing the external mediation of the liturgy to assist people in finding

¹⁵ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, Second Edition (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2002). Bradshaw argues for an original diversity of early worship practices, an important caution against idolizing any particular liturgy. Yet within this diversity he is able to trace certain patterns.

¹⁶ Alison, *Worship in a Violent World*: "[true worship of the true God] is not designed to take us outside our ordinary life, but to enable us to dwell more freely and creatively within it, a lifelong therapy for distorted desire."

their own subjective relationship with the Other. Competing for the approval of the congregation is a constant temptation in a world which tells us that gatherings are meant to entertain us and that the biggest danger to our liturgical assemblies is that they might be boring. As Alison rightly emphasizes:

"When people tell me that they find Mass boring, I want to say to them: it's supposed to be boring. It's a long term education in becoming un-excited, since only that will enable us to dwell in a quiet bliss which doesn't abstract from our present or our surroundings or our neighbor, but which increases our attention, our presence and our appreciation for what is around us. The build up to a sacrifice is exciting, the dwelling in gratitude that the sacrifice has already happened, and that we've been forgiven for and through it is, in terms of excitement, a long drawn-out-let-down.¹⁷

The liturgical assembly is not just a long drawn-out-let-down from the agitations and deceptions of mimetic rivalry. It is a long drawn-out-journey with the Risen Christ. The Emmaus Road narrative in Luke's gospel reminds us that it is not we who interpret the Scriptures or break the bread but the Risen Christ who meets us on the road in the midst of our confusion and despair and who interprets the Scriptures and breaks the bread (Luke 24: 13-35). Because Christ does it (preaches and teaches) our eyes may be open to recognize his risen presence in our midst: at the table, at the font, in the preaching, in the prayers. Presiding and preaching are therefore the acts of inviting Jesus in to stay, as the travelers on the road to Emmaus who invited him into their home asked him 'stay with us.' Mimetic theory lends us insights into the act of creating a hospitable, dependable environment and then getting out of the way so the Word can do its work.

We become obstacles (and rivals) with the Word when we want to presume the power of interpretation. Christ is the interpreter, as the story of Emmaus reminds us. And our lives are to be laid open to Christ's loving and sometimes difficult interpretation. This can happen best when there is an adequate level of Biblical literacy established

¹⁷ Alison, *Worship in a Violent World*.

among children and adults in the parish, such that the preacher can truly say "we" in regard to the Biblical story: we have heard it, we can ask our questions together, we can open ourselves to the way it might interpret us. And how might this level of literacy and openness to interpretation take place? We turn now to the practice of Mimetic Theory in the Christian classroom.

Before Rene Girard's mimetic anthropology, Maria Montessori proposed an anthropology of mimesis for children at the turn of the twentieth century. Through her own observations, she discovered that children from birth until around age seven are possessed of great powers of imitation, which she named the "absorbent mind." She claimed that unconsciously and without effort, children absorb everything in their environment, from language and cultural mores to particular quirks of behavior in their primary caregivers. Of course, she was observing what we call humanity's mimetic nature, a discovery made possible for her because she was observing children! Children are a bundle of raw mimetic nerves not yet inculturated to the adult practice of deception about the source of one's being.¹⁸ That the child was building a self through interaction with the elements of the environment that is the particular cultural milieu into which they were born became excruciatingly obvious to her. Speaking of the child, she writes: "Impressions do not merely enter his mind; they form it. They incarnate themselves in him."¹⁹

¹⁸ See the English translation in Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind (New York: NY: Dell Publishing, a division of The Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1984) It is interesting to note how complete the deception is, even for one with Dr. Montessori's observational skills. She believed that "the child has other powers than ours" and that the adult was no longer in possession of "the absorbent mind", 34.

¹⁹ Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, 36. Montessori does not use gender-neutral language, but we trust that the reader will be imaginative enough to picture both boys and girls in the classroom and both men and women as their educators.

Montessori understood that language, customs, worldview, beliefs are all absorbed by the child without any assistance from adults beyond their being present and in relationship with the child. And when she expanded the child's environment to include reading, science and mathematics through the use of concrete manipulatives – something we will discuss in more depth in a moment – she found that they absorbed that content as easily as the cultural material:

"And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child."²⁰

Dr. Montessori perceived that the child's self is formed in relationship to some other and rather brilliantly, in terms of avoiding the risks inherent in acquisitive mimesis, she located the constituting other not in a human being but in the more non-conflictual 'environment.' We will take a brief look at how that insight has been translated into a Christian catechesis for young children ages three to seven, focusing on two practical ways it offers of avoiding the pitfalls of rivalry and idolatry we discussed earlier. It is one thing to warn teachers against these risks, quite another to offer concrete advice on what avoiding them looks like in practice.

In *The Godly Play* curriculum, a Montessori-based curriculum by Jerome Berryman, our congregation has found just such a resource.²¹ In fact, its methodologies are so strong that adults need never have heard of Maria Montessori or René Girard and interindividual psychology – though what a pity if they have not! – to be able to

²⁰ Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* 19.

²¹ Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

successfully implement the curriculum. We will focus briefly on two aspects of that methodology – the use of concrete manipulatives and the role of the educator. Hopefully this will be enough to communicate the depth and strength of this Montessori-based approach to early childhood Christian education for those interested in Mimetic Theory.

A most basic insight provided by Maria Montessori's work is that the body is the interface between the mind of the child and the world, and the hand the primary instrument. The child studies and absorbs that which he can manipulate and explore, following his own inner urgings toward objects in his environment. This understanding led Dr. Montessori to develop concrete manipulatives for a wide range of subjects, such as geography, biology, and algebra. Apart from the intriguing pedagogical possibilities, this approach offers an elegant way to remove the adult from the middle of the child's encounter with the environment, thus minimizing the risk of rivalry. From the perspective of triangular desire, the educator must be able to consistently point beyond him/herself to the object of desire. In the Christian classroom, that object is a personal relationship with God. The educator's role, then, is to mediate that relationship without getting in the middle, to be present without becoming an obstacle, to point with word and deed beyond oneself toward the Divine.

We believe that children emerge from the womb already in a non-rivalistic, unmediated relationship with the Divine. Our choice as educators is between accepting the givenness of that relationship and nurturing it, or denying and thereby destroying it. We must relax into that givenness, realizing that it is something quite apart from ourselves, unique to the child, that we cannot control it and have no right to possession. We must have faith in the child's relationship with the Divine.

How does the use of concrete materials serve the goal of non-rivalistic mediation? It creates an environment where access to the educational materials is as egalitarian as possible. *The Godly Play* curriculum by Jerome Berryman is designed for children ages three to eight. Berryman was a student of Sofia Cavalletti, studying with her in the early 1970's in Italy. Cavalletti, herself a student of Dr. Montessori, pioneered the application of Montessori teaching principles to religious education.²² Berryman went on to develop over one hundred new lessons and materials beyond those he learned from Cavalletti. These materials present the stories of the Bible as concrete manipulatives. The people of the Bible are represented by simple wooden figures with no faces or details beyond the shape of the human body draped in clothing or gesturing with uplifted arms. The places of the Bible are represented by the desert box – a wooden box filled with sand – and by felt cloth underlays that are blue for water, green or brown for land. Mountains, temples, tombs, trees, and houses are all represented in three dimensional models that the child can handle, inspect, and engage with physically.

The materials are arranged in shelves in order around the classroom corresponding to their order in the Bible: the first shelf begins with Creation, the middle shelf contains the Nativity materials, and the final shelf ends with the Ascension. By the use of concrete materials the stories have been taken out of the Bible where the children need them to be decoded by a competent reader, into the arena in which children operate, the physical world. During individual work time which takes place after the story is told,

²² Sofia Cavalletti, Patricia Coulter, Gianna Gobbi, and Silvana Q. Montanaro, M.D., *The Good Shepherd & The Child: A Joyful Journey* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995). See also Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, Second Edition trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).

the children are free to take any story off the shelf and retell it through imaginative play. They are invited by the structure of the environment to engage on their own with the story and to create their own meaning without the interference of a well-meaning adult. This avoids the risk of rivalry over the sacred texts. This use of the environment assures that the educator is not in possession of the Biblical narrative; the stories actually belong to everyone equally, with no one's access to the story dependent upon the mediation of another.

Then what is the role of the educator in an environment such as this? Simply, to tell the story. In the Godly Play classroom, educators use simple language and the materials to present the story without interpretation and invite the children to make meaning out of the story for themselves through the use of wondering questions. To do so effectively, we must surrender our own personal needs for control or power to the Word, enacting Luther's directive to 'let the Word alone do the work.' These simple elements – plain, unadorned objects; plain, unadorned language; simple movements – direct the attention away from the teller and toward what is being told. The use of open-ended wondering questions takes the responsibility for making meaning away from the authority figure and toward the individual or group. This approach allows relationships with the Divine to develop that do not involve the educator.

The child's relationship with God must be deepened without the child knowing that the teacher is involved. Montessori herself went very far in downplaying the role and necessity of the adult teacher: "The child has a mind able to absorb knowledge. He has the power to teach himself."²³ Montessori enjoyed relating the story of visitors to her experimental children's house who were astonished to see children younger than five

²³ Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, 17.

years old whose parents were illiterate reading and writing. If the visitor asked the child, “‘Who taught you to write?’ they often answered with astonishment: ‘Taught me? No one has taught me!’”²⁴ One certainly cannot come into rivalry with someone over an object they do not perceive as being received! In other words, when this happens with the relationship with the Divine, when children are permitted to access the stories and make their own meaning, there is little chance that conflict will develop with the educator (rivalry) or that the educator will be mistaken for a divine being (idolatry). During the response time, when the children are encouraged to interact with the materials on their own, the adult must shrink almost to invisibility.

Yet we are human and both rivalry and idolatry seem to be an unavoidable fact of life this side of Paradise. What is happening in a rivalristic relationship between an adult and a child? One might think that the adult-child relationship is so heavily weighted in the adult’s favor that one could not possibly feel threatened by a child. But adults do feel threatened, often, and the outward sign is what we call the oh-so-dreaded ‘power struggle.’ Anger is a signal that there is something here, something the child is threatening to take from the adult, which is worthy of an all-out defense. That thing is power, in other words, the position of dominance in the relationship. And of course, once the perceptive child sees the extent to which an adult will go to defend this power, which most likely he has stumbled upon or reached for unknowingly, his desire for it is intensified. This in turn intensifies the adult’s determination and there it is, the classic power struggle between a PhD in Comparative Religions and a three year old child.

There is no way to win a power struggle. With power struggles, the focus is not ego-less and God centered, but ego-driven and self-centered. If the child wins, there is

²⁴ Montessori, The Absorbent Mind, 19.

anarchy. If the teacher wins there is totalitarianism which, if the child's spirit is broken, will be the type of relationship he/she will seek shelter in his/her entire life. And this is the greater risk in the mentor/student relationship, not rivalry but idolatry. If the mentor becomes necessary for the student's relationship with the Divine, he may come to believe that Being can be secured not through elimination of the teacher turned model/obstacle but through perfect obedience. The teacher becomes the object of worship and the worshipper empties himself into the person of power, ceding all independence and personal authority to him/her. Environments with emphasis on the teacher, no matter how worthy the subject matter being imparted, risk creating 'followers' who spend their lives lurching from one hero to another, feeling secure in the following, no matter where.

So with the *Godly Play* curriculum we have a method that increases the likelihood that our classrooms will become a community rooted not in rivalry but in faith, not in idolatry but in relationship with the one true source of our being. By giving up control over access to both the Biblical narrative and the process of making meaning, the educator creates an environment of trust and self-giving. This power-sharing sends a powerful message of love and respect to the children. The educator is proclaiming with the very structure of the environment: You don't need me in order to have a relationship with the Divine. I trust you. I love you. You are indeed children of God.

We hope that these insights into avoiding the dangers of idolatry and mimetic rivalry in the liturgical assembly and in the classroom are helpful to those interested in Mimetic Theory and its application to parish work. Ultimately the privilege of the pastor or teacher is to draw others into the proximity of the external mediation of the Biblical text and the liturgy of the church. If we are successful, this success must be measured not

in teaching our congregations or students to mimic our voices, our actions, our interpretations, but to imitate the Word, and to speak with the accents of God, which we learn only by way of the monotheism which avoids idolatry and the relaxation which avoids mimetic rivalry. If our students and congregations come to realize that they are loved in and of themselves, held in being by a gracious Other, given the gift of life by a gratuitous Giver, and if they are able to share this love and avoid the scandals of creating scapegoats and victims, it will be because we have made a space for them to encounter the Word, and to 'let it alone do the work.' This is suggested by Jean-Luc Marion, who says:

"In short, our language will be able to speak of God only to the degree that God in his Word, will speak our language and teach us in the end to speak it as he speaks it---divinely, which means to say in all abandon. In short, it is a question of learning to speak our language with the accents---with the accent of the Word speaking it."²⁵

²⁵ Marion, God without Being, 144.